OLD ADAM'S LIKENESS

LUCY POATE STEBBINS

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BY
LUCY POATE STEBBINS

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To my husband
H. L. S.

Old Adam's likeness, set to dress this garden.

Richard the Second, III, iv

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CHAPTER I

A FUGITIVE IN THE BEECH WOOD

Stephen Boone lay prone upon his face under the great beech tree which marked the end of the wood and the summit of the hill. One arm embraced the trunk while his unconscious body drew healing from the soil beneath. So true a son of Earth was he, that he felt a tenderness in her hard, unyielding breast which soothed him more than could the soft bosom of his mother after the flesh. The crushed chicory against which his face was pressed was wet with his tears. It was the first stir of dawn, but the boy had lain there scarcely an hour. He was drugged with sleep, his body utterly exhausted by labor and emotion. A chipmunk solemnly regarded the prostrate giant. Perhaps he knew him. Certainly he showed no fear, though he kept a watchful eye on the dog, Max. A black cricket ran impertinently over the boy's sunburned neck. He stirred uneasily but did not awaken. His dog, which had kept at his heels through the mad run of the night and had slept here at his feet, disapproving but faithful, rose, shook himself, and looked speculatively at his master. The

chipmunk hastily retired. Stephen's left arm was flung out full length, the palm bearing heavily upon the earth. Max stepped carefully over the arm and licked with rough, persuasive tongue the column of throat rising from the gray woollen shirt. Stephen flung up both arms, sat up, and gazed about him.

He was immediately aware of his outrageous situation. 'Good boy!' he exclaimed, addressing Max with gratitude. Thanks to his interposition there was yet time for him to return to the house without arousing his family's concern. The sun was already visible by the great beech and within a few minutes they would all be stirring, this morning to more purpose than ever. The farmhouse lay a quarter of a mile below him in a hollow of the hillside. Through the silver boles of the beeches, he could catch glimpses of it in the pale light. Long and low it stretched with dark masses behind of barns and outhouses. The gray blobs at the front would soon resolve themselves into overgrown lilac bushes.

With Max at his heels, he broke into a trot down the rough, steep path which led from the spring called Diana's Bath, twisting here and there through the beeches down to the country road which lay between the wood and the cropped lawn of the farmhouse. Save for a dull depression, he had for the time forgotten his trouble. All his present desire was to conceal his night in the open. Innocent as it had been of the customary signs of a debauch, he felt that his

abandonment to emotion gave it that savor. He walked around the house intending to enter the back door, which was never fastened. In the yard he gave a hurried glance for signs of life and, seeing none, hastily deluged his head under the pump. The shock braced him. As Max would have done, he shook himself, gave an order to the dog to await him on the back stoop, and hastily entered the house. Inside he paused to remove his heavy boots. Carrying them in one hand, he crossed the kitchen and dining-room and ascended the steep, straight stair which led from the left of the sitting-room to the upper story. Hearing no stir in his sisters' rooms beyond, he stealthily entered his own, where he pulled down the bedclothes and tossed about the pillows to give the bed the appearance of having been occupied. When he had completed the ruin, tumbled as it was, it suggested to his weary mind delightful repose, and, throwing himself down, he fell instantly into a deep sleep.

Only to his own consciousness had he been quiet. In reality he had effected a fearful din. The stairs had creaked under his tread. One of his shoes he had dropped awkwardly just inside his door. His unshod feet had stamped heavily about his room which was just above his mother's.

But he had not awakened her. Hours before, she had become conscious of a chill breeze. Reaching down to twitch the comfortable over herself and her snoring giant, she thought as always of Stephen.

Stephen, she reflected, always slept like the dead. He never had the sense to wake and pull up the covers. There was one thing certain, if she went upstairs to cover Stephen, she'd not get another wink of sleep. Easy as it would be to snuggle down into her feathered nest, experience told her that, once out of bed, she would be as wakeful as a hawk. She hesitated between her comfort and Stephen's. She knew right well he wouldn't really take cold. Quite suddenly it occurred to her that after to-night she couldn't cover up Stephen. She sighed, swung her plump legs over the side of the bed, and padded heavily across the rag carpet out into the sitting-room. Ever since the babyhood of her children, she had kept a small kerosene lamp burning nightly on the table by the stairs. It had been such a comfort when they were little. She took it and plodded up the stairs, massive, comfortable-looking, with her long braid giving an odd little-girl look to her shadowed white head. Her heavy cambric nightgown buttoned high in the neck, its sleeves ending in neat ruffles about the wrists, would have become the chaperon of a regiment. Carefully shielding the lamp from the draught which met her when she opened the door, she peered cautiously into Stephen's room. The bed was empty, the white honeycomb spread undisturbed, the pillows standing tall and menacing behind the prim, embroidered shams. For a moment panic had her. Stephen gone and Max with him! Gone since the evening! Had he run

away? Had the threatened yoke looked too heavy? She tried to be quiet, to think calmly. Setting the lamp on the little washstand, she took a patchwork quilt from the foot of the bed and with it wrapped about her, seated herself in the little black rocking-chair with the Turkey-red cushions. Absorbed in thought, she rocked lightly back and forth, her left arm crooked as though something precious nestled there. From where she sat she could see his closet door wide open. Evidently he had taken nothing away. She spoke softly. 'He was all right till I said, "Want to go upstairs and see the spare room? It's all fixed now for you and Letty." He looked queer at that. He didn't say it looked nice or anything and off he went looking black as a thunder-cloud. I ain't seen him since.' She sat silent a moment, then continued her monologue with 'He hadn't realized it. No, sir, he just hadn't realized it. He never realized.' She said the words over and over as if familiarity might render them less terrifying. She sighed heavily. 'Too late to change.' The oil lamp began to smell. As usual Primrose had forgotten that, though the other lamps needed washing and filling once in two days, this one had to be attended to daily. She rose, blew out the lamp, and reseated herself by the window. She was quite certain now that he was somewhere about the place, suffering, seeking healing in some loved refuge. None of her children could ever bear to feel bad indoors.

With the pale dawn, she saw him tearing through the beech wood, Max at his heels. Hastily she folded and replaced the comfortable, caught up her lamp, and scuttled down to her own room, where, chilled and sorrowful, she crept into the warm bed and lay there listening to Stephen's racket. In spite of her pain, she had to smile at that. When all was quiet, she guessed that he had fallen asleep and, shaking her husband broad awake, she forbade his calling Stephen. Uncle Lige and the girls could give what help he needed with the chores.

CHAPTER II

THE BOONES

HALF an hour later the mother, standing at the kitchen range frying pancakes and heaping them in a great mound in the warming oven to become steamed and soggy, went over in her mind the little she knew of the causes of this day's business. One night last week Stephen had come in very late, after two o'clock. It had made her uneasy, for he wasn't a boy who stayed out nights. She had visions of him in a wild crowd playing cards and drinking in some one's barn. Letty? On Letty her mind lingered, waxing more anxious. Nobody knew what kind of man her father had been, but he was a Frenchman and that was bad enough. Letty's mother was dead. She thought uneasily of Letty's pretty figure. In the morning Stephen hadn't waited to be called, and that alone was a thing to wonder at. He had been in the kitchen almost as soon as she, and he'd had a face like cracked ice.

'Mother,' said he, 'I'm going to marry Letty Ollitrault. It's best we should get married right away. It's best to get it over.'

His mother sank weakly into the old rocker. 'Oh, Stevie!' she exclaimed. 'That little girl? That little

young thing?' Her face grew years older, but her son didn't look at her.

'Well?' he inquired moodily. 'Can I bring her home here? It ought to suit father. He's been bound to keep me on the farm.'

'Yes,' she replied heavily, 'you can bring her here. I'll talk to father.' And that was all she'd had to go by. She did wish that she could ever get a decent night's sleep. She worked hard enough to earn it. If she wasn't too tired to sleep, she was often too anxious. She did feel so ashamed to think of a Boone having to marry a girl like Letty. It would be a comfort to have Stephen with them, but it wasn't right with such a voice as he had. And yet this grandchild would be her very own. Margaret and Gerald were so far away and she'd never even seen Jaffrey's children.

She went to the back porch and gave an energetic pull to the rope which rang the great bell. Her father had hung it in the far-off days when it had been possible to get adequate help for farming their many acres. When the wind blew from the northwest, its brazen tongue could be heard far down in the valley where the town lay. Now it awakened Stephen and after pulling on his boots he ran downstairs. He gave his mother a sheepish kiss as he passed her on his way to the kitchen sink.

'Do you want to go to the station after Grace or shall I send Prim?' she asked him as she took up the

coffee pot. 'Whoever does is to stop on the way back for Letty. I want she should have plenty of time to dress.'

'Let Prim go,' he answered briefly.

At that moment Diana and Primrose came in from the barn, their father towering behind them, Uncle Lige struggling in the rear looking for an opening to scoot by them and be first in the dining-room. Primrose, the youngest of the Boones, was at nineteen a big handsome creature with a loud voice of thrilling sweetness. Without constraint she had grown as Nature had intended. If she chose to walk the hilltops with the stride of Demeter, there was no one to hinder her; she might shout as loudly as she pleased, and none would marvel; she might bathe in the icy waters of Diana's Bath, and there was none to regard. The joy of freedom was at times so poignant as to become pure pain. She loved all that she did and she had never yet wanted to do anything she was not free to do.

Diana, ten years older, was Primrose drawn more delicately. It was as though time and the throngs among which she passed her days had caused a refitting of the pattern, a little taken in here, a little there, just enough to save her from being conspicuous. Whatever Primrose felt was written on her face, was heard in her voice, but Diana had learned repression and gauged with accuracy how much could be safely betrayed. She showed always a little less than that.

She looked now with distaste at the pile of heavy pancakes. 'Oh, mother, dear! Have you no care for our digestions if not for our palates?' she lamented.

'Your father likes them soggy and so does Prim,' her mother retorted firmly. 'If they have digestions, they don't know it. I'll bake fresh for you and Stephen.'

'You go and sit down, mother,' objected Diana, taking the pancake turner from her. 'Father, make mother sit down with you. I'll bake for Stephen and me.' Her face, usually fresh and unlined, was to-day worn and troubled. This marriage of Stephen's was hitting her hard. He had been going back to New York with her, could have lived in the apartment she shared with two other teachers, and she would have made any sacrifice so that he might bring to perfection that golden voice. Wherever Diana had failed, he was to have succeeded. Now behold him! Sitting down on the back side of a desert with a mess of pottage! She looked angrily at him, but her expression softened as his told her how unpalatable he found that same pottage.

He was perched on the corner of the kitchen table, swinging a leg, glum, miserable.

He felt her eye upon him and looked up. 'All our fine plans, Diana —— ' he began scornfully.

She felt so sorry for him that she said more than she had intended. 'Only postponed, Stephen. We'll never give up, you and I. Next year —— ' her voice

trailed into silence as she remembered Letty and the baby. Goodness knew how many babies might be entailed by Stephen's idiotic rashness! Really, she thought angrily, her father and mother were not free from blame. Why hadn't they made an effort to buy off the girl? Her mother's stern Christianity disregarded the fact that two wrongs couldn't make a right. Or they might have adopted the little wretch themselves.

'Let's eat out here,' suggested Stephen wistfully, and Diana silently spread an end of the kitchen table for their breakfast.

Tom Peebles, the second and temporary hired man, entered at that moment, late as he frequently was. This summer he had fallen frankly in love with Primrose and he regarded her with a tender but somewhat critical amusement, as she ate, rapturously, the soggy pancakes, pasted with yellow butter, swimming in golden syrup.

'You'll be a tub before you're thirty, Prim,' he remarked.

'Why?' she demanded in surprise.

'Cause and effect,' he answered tersely. 'Still,' he mused, 'you may die first with a hidgus pain in your tummy.'

Her answer was to reach for a doughnut, large and greasy. Tom himself emptied a huge porringer of oatmeal and followed it with a half-dozen of the crisp cakes Diana brought him. There were oranges and

bananas on the table and a square pressed-glass dish full of late blackberries.

The Boones were 'good providers,' as Uncle Lige always declared. He was a chubby old fellow with a thick white beard. A great reader and an intelligent, his opinions were valued except on matters requiring quick decision. There he was useless, for he thought with extreme deliberation and, having thought, groped for the right words until he was past bearing.

'I hope it won't come up showery to-night,' remarked Mrs. Boone apprehensively.

'I opine we shall be blessed with continuous fair weather both to-day and on the morrow,' answered Uncle Lige with unction. 'If so be, however, that it should prove unsalubrious this evening, where was it your intention to have the ceremony performed?'

'In case of rain, the obsequies will be held in the barn,' said Prim flippantly.

'That being the case, my theory is that it would be well to make somewhat of a clearance in that region,' answered Uncle Lige.

'In the parlor, I should have said,' Prim hastily corrected. It was poor sport teasing Uncle Lige. 'You'll let us have Tom all day?' she continued, turning to her father. 'Stephen has got to help, too, and Martin when he comes.'

Jaffrey nodded. He always agreed to whatever Primrose suggested. She rose from the table. 'You

harness for me, Tom, while I dress,' she commanded. Tom nodded and went to the barn. He was all ready and standing at the horses' heads when she came out to him in a fresh pink chambray. There was a prejudice in that region against pink on the ground that it was a countrified color, but Prim's code of freedom told her to dress as she pleased and the wearing of the despised tint added zest. She had thrust a dahlia as pink as her frock through the broad black velvet sash.

'Prettier than a dahlia,' thought Tom, stooping swiftly to put a caress on the girl's cheek as she passed him. 'Smoother, sweeter than a dahlia.'

Prim bridled, looked at him with incipient anger, then took her clean handkerchief from her bosom and ostentatiously scrubbed her cheek to flaming rose.

'Only a brotherly salute,' he assured her. 'You look good enough to eat.'

'I hate to be touched,' she objected, mollified.

He watched her drive out of the yard, take the sharp turn to the left, and disappear over the brow of the hill.

CHAPTER III

LETTY

The hollow in which lay the Boone farm was a deep gash near the summit of a steeply ascending hill. It curved like the wide-open mouth of a grinning Titan; the upper lip bearded with the beech wood extended on up the hill; the lower sloped downward a long three miles to town. Near its base was a wooded knoll, a mole upon the giant's chin, and here, nestled between mole and tip of chin, was the story-and-a-half dwelling where Letty lived with her stepfather. All the land of mouth and upper lip and lower as far as the mole belonged to the Boones. There ended Jaffrey's property and there began that of John Huddis.

While despair like a goad at his back had driven Stephen in that mad flight over his father's lands, Letty, sleepless too, had been sitting on the floor by the window of her low upper room. Her real name was Lettice and, like her namesake of the fairy tale, she had let down her long hair which fell like a flood about her in the moonlight looking more alive than Letty herself. She had been brushing it, but before braiding it was enjoying its beauty as a mantle while she gazed for the last time out of her little window up at Stephen's hill. She thought it likely that Stephen

had fallen in love with her hair and she thanked it by kissing a gleaming tress. She always felt as if her hair belonged to her by accident so that it was not wrong to love it. It gave her much the same pleasure another might acknowledge in owning a choice bit of pottery. She might have been the inspiration of a painter depicting a small saint of early Italy. Her great dark eyes had a trick of moving suddenly while the lids were motionless. Her small pear-shaped face was of a clear olive color; her little brown hands were tenderly modeled. Under the ugly crocheted yoke of her coarse nightdress her firm brown breasts were pointed like twin towers. Letty was ashamed of them. She thought them vulgar.

Looking up the hill she fixed her gaze upon a spot where a cleverly constructed tunnel might lead direct to the Boone place. Thither she directed the telescope of her fancy. To-morrow! Ah, to-morrow! She drew a quick breath, then sat as quiet as before. Her mind reverted to the incidents of her queer little courtship. Stephen had never noticed her in high school. The first time he'd ever paid any attention to her was when she'd been sweeping the snow off the stoop last March — a sugar snow just to make the sap run. He was on his way to the mill and was driving the big blacks hitched to an old democrat. He had called to her, 'Hello, Letty! Going to the sugar social to-night?' It wasn't so much the way Stephen looked, though he was so awfully handsome. It was

his voice. When he talked, it was better than other folks' singing.

She hadn't an idea of going to the sugar social, but her stepfather — she owed him that anyway — had called out from the barn door, 'If she had anybody to go with, like enough she'd go. What's the matter with your stopping by for her, Steve?'

She'd been so flustered! She ran right into the house tracking the snow onto her clean floor. She heard Stephen's big laugh and then there was a knock at the door. When she opened it, there he was, handsome and smiling, and he said, 'How about it, Letty? May I call for you?'

When he came after her, he was driving the 'Little Mare' with his red rubber-tired buggy. After that it was just like magic. He'd taken her to choir rehearsals and she had sat back in the dim shadows of the church hearing only Stephen's voice. Such a silly thing it made her think of — pound sweets and quinces. Then there were socials and Grange meetings and every Saturday night the band concert on the Academy lawn. She wouldn't ever forget the Methodist ice-cream social. She and Stephen had hung around with the other young folks until the band had stopped playing. Then, late as it was, they'd walked all over town. By and by they went up to the cemetery and sat down on the twisted iron bench on the Boone lot. Stephen put an arm around her, but he was never one to be mushy. He talked

some about his voice. He was going away, going to New York. He hoped he'd be a second De Reszke. It made her feel sad, but somehow it didn't seem real. Suddenly the church clock down below struck One! They thought, of course, it was wrong. It wasn't wrong at all. They hurried like a house afire down to the church sheds after Stephen's horse. They went home aflying. Stephen helped her out and waited to see her get into the house. She couldn't get in. The door was locked. She knocked and then she called and then she knocked again. Stephen hitched the Little Mare to the post and came up the steps. He shouted in a voice to wake the dead.

There wasn't any answer.

'Old geezer!' he muttered.

'He does it just to be mean,' she said, half crying.

'That your room?' he asked, pointing to her little window over the stoop. She nodded. The window was open. 'I'll boost you,' he said, and lifted her up to his shoulder. She scrambled into her window. My! how glad she was it was dark!

She was no more than in when she heard the bolts drawn and looking down she saw her stepfather in the light of the lamp he carried. He looked uglier than ever, grinning like an old fox.

'You step in, young feller,' he said; 'I've got a bone to pick with you.'

She couldn't hear a word, just a growl and a grumble until, all at once, Stephen just yelled, 'You

damned liar!' By and by, Stephen came out, rushed off the porch, and was gone with the Little Mare kicking out her wicked little heels. Stephen was singing at the top of his lungs for all the world as if he was drunk — 'Onward, Christian Soldiers!' at that.

Next morning, Stephen had come down dressed in his best and asked her to marry him next week after the thrashers had gone. She'd only seen him twice since then, but he'd seemed just like himself, only kind of quiet. She guessed her stepfather would be glad to get rid of her now he was going to marry Mrs. Crowell.

CHAPTER IV

BEECHWOOD'S WELCOME

It was ten next morning when Primrose swept by the knoll on her way to the depot. As she passed the little house she sent out her voice ringing like a silver hunting horn with its 'Hulloa! Hulloa!' Little Letty put her startled face over the door which in Dutch fashion opened in two parts. 'I'll be back in an hour and a half,' called Primrose in her clear, decided voice. 'Be all ready. I'm going to take you back with me.'

Letty shut the upper half of the door and stood thinking. How Primrose hated her! How could she stand riding back with her and Grace! A perfect stranger she'd never said 'Boo' to! And Grace's children! And her husband, a minister at that! There seemed to be a lot of hard things about getting married. Even at seventeen Letty found change appalling. She went through the low rooms of the ugly house making sure that all was tidy and clean. She didn't want any one saying she'd left things in a state. She had finished her packing and now hauled out onto the stoop a huge old telescope containing all her worldly possessions. The books, relics of high school, made it heavy. Beside her clothes, she had half a dozen thin silver teaspoons and six cups and

saucers which had been her mother's. Letty thought them shockingly bright and glaring, but she kept them for her mother's sake. They were Old Staffordshire and worth, if not a king's ransom, surely a ransom for little brown Letty. It taxed her strength to get the telescope out onto the stoop, but as she panted there, she pictured Prim's swooping out of the surrey and snatching it up like a contemptuous eagle. Worse, Grace's husband might get out! She felt embarrassed to death at the idea and falling upon the telescope dragged and pushed and hauled and tugged the difficult burden down the little gravel path to the horse block. She went back to the stoop feeling a momentary pleasure in her prowess. She sat down on the top step with her chin in cupped hands, her elbows resting on her knees. Daphne Gray, her pet cat, came round the corner of the house and jumped into her lap. She was a six months' Maltese — Letty called her a Maltee — very sleek and plump, with the engaging graces of a kitten and the staying propensities of a cat. She wore a pink ribbon and a little bell which prevented her being the perfect mouser she aspired to be.

There sat Letty with Daphne Gray and thought and thought, first of one thing, then another, then of nothing at all, until the surrey, dustier than when she had last seen it, flashed around the bend and Primrose sent out her high 'Hulloa! Hulloa!' before she caught sight of the little figure waiting her bridal

coach. Letty, too, wore pink, but where Prim's was the badge of freedom, Letty's was the livery of the countrified. She ran down the walk quickly, unwilling to keep such folks waiting. There was no one to say good-bye to, no one to wish her good luck on this important journey. Her stepfather had gone to the cheese factory saying he'd be up for the wedding at night and, as for Daphne Gray, only death should part them. Mr. Plunkett, tall, thin, slightly bald, jumped out of the surrey to shake hands and help her in, but Letty was too full of Daphne Gray to see him properly.

'Please may I take her, Primrose?' she asked diffidently, and Prim assented with a gracious condescension worthy of Queen Bess. Mr. Plunkett put in the telescope and held Letty's full skirt from the dusty wheel as she jumped lightly up.

They were off, going slowly round the sharp turn at the base of the hill. Grace leaned past little Margaret and Gerald and patted Letty's hand. Letty's eyes filled with tears and a lump came in her throat. She winked fast and looked steadily at the dusty road. 'I've brought your wedding dress, Letty, child,' said Grace. Her voice, as sweet as the other Boones' was much softer. It held charming thoughts. 'Just wait till you see it.' She laughed lightly. It was a chuckly little laugh like the creek flowing over white pebbles where it was shallowest down near the pine grove.

The horses topped the rise. They dashed down the steep bank eager for home. Primrose brought them up sharp at the horse block with strength and skill. Tom Peebles hurried forward to help them out. Letty came first. Tom turned quickly back to lift out Margaret and Gerald, pale with excitement and fatigue. How the Boones swarmed together, all but Stephen! Letty, conscious of being an outsider, saw him sitting on a block of wood by the barn turning the huge ice-cream freezer borrowed from the church. He had his back toward them and had not turned to look. Letty moved lightly toward him, her hands slightly outstretched, fingers a little apart. She put her two hands over his eyes in a playful impulse wholly unlike her.

'Grace!' Stephen guessed sulkily.

Unanswered, he snatched the small hands from his eyes. 'Letty!' he exclaimed in a voice dreadful to her ears. She shrank back so quickly that he flushed with hot shame for his roughness. He had leaped to his feet and now, on an impulse as unusual as her own had been, he bent and kissed her gravely. Pleased and reassured, she shyly tucked her arm in his and the two started for the house.

Mrs. Boone with an exclamation scurried over the lawn toward them. 'Land sakes! Stephen, you'll let the custard set!' Such was a direful happening, necessitating the emptying of the entire freezer. The girls had always maintained it was a myth, but they felt

uneasy and came to assist. Fortunately the cream was declared sufficiently frozen and the girls, hovering like bees about their mother, helped her to remove the dasher, force the cream down, and cover all with burlap against the evening. The dasher was handed to Stephen as his due, but he passed it on a platter to the children, looking much as if he were bestowing the head of John the Baptist on a charger, and the little people, leaping from strangers to this delightful intimacy, scraped and licked to the great detriment of their clothes.

Now they were all in the house. 'Grace,' Grandma Boone was saying briskly, 'I've put you and Martin in your old room and the children in the cubby chamber.'

'Oh, goody, goody, goody!' cried Margaret, pressing close to grandma's side and putting her little hand in the plump one.

They stood in the door and looked into the cubby room. It was at the end of the long upstairs hall and was lighted by two dormer windows looking out on the white country road and the red district schoolhouse far down it. On either side of each window were two little doors and, when one opened these, one saw cubbies as were cubbies. One was empty, with hooks, just a clothes closet, no better than any one else's closet. The next had hooks too, but there were clothes on the hooks and clothes as were clothes! Right in front was mother's white satin wedding dress. Be-

hind it hung grandma's, little enough for Aunt Diana, pearly gray silk, covered with little patches edged with gray ruffles. On the floor were shoes to wear with that dress, high-heeled slippers of bronze, so tiny. Great-grandmother's dress hung behind that — great-grandmother's dress of maroon velvet with its surplice waist and huge puff sleeves and tier after tier of ruffles on the skirt. Great-great's wasn't so exciting. That was a sprigged muslin with big sleeves not so very different from nowadays. Great-great-great-grandmother's was the last. That had a brocaded under-dress and a salmon coat gathered at the hips. Over the bosom crossed a lace fichu. How yellow was the lace of that fichu! Great-great-great-grandma had been married in 1780. And this was the 'Brides' Cubby.'

How about the other cubbies? Oh, they were wonderful, too! For the one at the left had drawers in it — four drawers all just alike on the outside. The one at the top was full of arrow-heads and Indian relics which Great-Grandfather Haynes had found when he first came to the farm. The drawer below held Uncle Jaffrey's birds' eggs, and though he lived way off in South America, Margaret thought of him as so big and black and terrible that she dared not lay a finger on the birds' eggs and shut the drawer hastily. The third held butterflies and moths, very beautiful, which had been Aunt Diana's mostly, though some were Aunt Primrose's and Uncle Stephen's. In the

bottom drawer was nothing at all — not one thing; Gerald's drawer, grandma said.

On the other side of that window was the toy cubby. Such funny old dolls with china faces and black china hair! A home-made hobby horse which Great-Grandfather Haynes had bestrode when he was a little boy in Wales! Games; authors, parchesi, Bible characters!

The room itself had a wall-paper of trellised red roses as big as cabbages, a pumpkin-yellow floor with rag rugs of grandma's weaving, a painted chest of drawers, an old mirror in a black oval. The two trundle beds were covered with gay patchwork quilts. Over each was a picture. One was an illuminated text which said, 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me,' and there they were, all about Him, on His knees, in His arms. The other made Margaret terribly sad, though she couldn't have told any one. It was Bo Peep. She had been crying and, though she had stopped, her eyes were still full of tears. They followed one all about the room. Did Bo Peep think Margaret had stolen her sheep? Margaret wondered if she had stolen them. Bo Peep's eyes made her feel so.

Now the children gazed silent and happy about the cubby room. Behind them stood Letty who had followed them forlornly. Stephen had disappeared and Grace was surrounded by the other Boone women chattering in their loud, sweet voices. Pre-

sently Grace detached herself and coming to the cubby room put an arm about Letty.

'We must try on your dress, Letty. It may need some alteration — I'll bring it to your room. Mother, which room is Letty's?'

'They're to have the spare room,' Diana answered quickly.

Mrs. Boone opened the door of the room at the left of the cubby and stood back for Letty to admire. It was a large chamber, the floor, except for its gray painted border, gay with a rag carpet. It contained a quantity of walnut furniture, a marble-topped table with an oil lamp on a crocheted doily, a marble-topped washstand on which stood a blue Canton washbowl and pitcher, a huge dresser with a full-length mirror, two armchairs and a friendly little rocker. Letty quailed before the glory of the room, a vast, funereal bed with a carved back scaling heaven and a footpiece higher than Letty's waist. It was covered with a snowy Marseilles counterpane and the pillow shams struck a gay note which echoed discordantly through the stern *ensemble*. They were marked in red outline stitch and on one was depicted a 'vile, chubby boy' asleep, while on the other rested an emaciated little girl. They had been Diana's first embroidery and Mother Boone took great pride in them. Primrose touched the boy — 'Stephen's,' she said briefly. Reaching over to lay a finger on the girl, she announced, 'Letty's.'

Letty colored. Primrose was horrid, she thought. For a moment she hated the bed and the room and the assembled Boones.

In came Grace, her arms full of billows of yellow lawn. She sat down in the little rocker. 'Do slip off your dress, Letty. I can't wait to see if it's right.'

Letty, who had never dressed in a gymnasium, was miserably conscious of the spectators. She looked sulky as she unbuttoned her dress. It fastened in the back and she was slow about it. She was proud of her cheap corset cover with the two-inch pink ribbon through its coarse insertion, but she was deeply ashamed of the full bust it covered.

Grace looked deprecatingly at the ribbon.

'If you'll slip off your corset cover, dear,' she breathed softly, 'I'll run in some white.'

Flushing dully, Letty obediently divested herself of the offending garment. Could the pink ribbon be vulgar? she wondered. Very nice, she had thought it.

Grace went to her room and returned presently with a bolt of white ribbon and a bodkin. Diana took them from her and ran in the ribbon. Letty noticed how careful she was to keep the satin side out. She had never thought to be so fussy.

Diana held the discarded pink ribbon up to Margaret, who had been unable to keep away from what she divined was a news centre. 'You may have it for your dolls. Only not for their underclothes, mind you,' she added severely. She felt nervous and irri-

table. 'You shouldn't wear pink,' she said to Letty.

The girl felt dreadfully snubbed. An almost purple flush succeeded the rose Grace's words had occasioned. Diana and Primrose both seemed determined to be horrid. Stephen acted queer. 'Does any one want me?' thought Letty.

Diana handed back the corset cover with her face slightly averted. Almost in tears, Letty put it on and was fumbling over the buttons when Grace came over, fastened them, and tied the ribbon in a perky bow. She slipped the yellow frock over Letty's head, buttoned the twenty-four buttons down the back, gave a pat here, a poke there, adjusted the black velvet sash, and spun Letty about facing the long mirror.

Humiliation vanished. Here was a prideful canary preening golden feathers. Her ugly blush had faded leaving the rich cream habitual to her. Her eyes were black as her sash. The sleeves showed dimpled elbows and arms of palest saffron. The dress changed her into quite a different person, one who was able to raise pouted lips upon which trembled a grateful kiss.

'Will Aunt Letty's dress hang in the "Brides' Cubby"?' asked Margaret. 'It is so very beautiful,' she went on in slow, candid tones, piercingly sweet.

'When she's through wearing it,' her mother answered gayly. 'But she's to wear it many times and be ever so happy in it before that day comes.'

With a pang Letty permitted Grace to unbutton

the frock and spread it out in all its bouffant glory on the great bed. The Boones melted away and Letty, alone at last, knelt to unstrap her telescope. It was impossible for her to resume the pink dress after Diana's harshness. But she had run to pink! Regretfully she donned a faded blue chambray, patched under the arms.

She opened drawers and stowed away her few belongings. In the closet she found a coat hanger of padded red silk which she reserved for her wedding dress, undeterred by the clash of colors. Her other frocks she put on hooks, each hanging forlornly by a sleeve. There was always a betraying buttonish wrinkle on the right sleeve of Letty's dresses.

Having finished, she looked about her. The house was very quiet; every one else had gone downstairs. Suddenly it occurred to Letty that she was about to lose that familiar aloneness to which she had been so long accustomed. She hadn't enjoyed it very much when she had it. She enjoyed losing it still less. This wasn't her room; it was Stephen's just as much as hers. She tiptoed to the door and locked it. The key didn't behave as if it expected her to do it. Conscience suggested that she should be down helping in the kitchen. A quaint monkish proverb she had often heard the minister quote occurred to her: 'Prayer and meat never took time from work.' With sophistry she decided to use prayer as an excuse for delay. Kneeling beside the huge bed, she tried to ask for guidance,

but her thoughts flew like bees in summer-time, from the lovely gown so near she caught its flower-like perfume, to Stephen, to her mother dead these three years, to a hundred other topics. At last with humility she said 'Our Father' and then went down to face again these formidable Boones.

The womenfolk were all in the kitchen and dinner was all but ready. Letty flew to assist. She cut the heavy pies in great wedges, carried to the sink a kettle of corn almost as large as herself, and having poured off the boiling water, arranged the ears on two great plates, log-cabin style, which won admiring approval from Mother Boone. There was the regular country dinner; crisp salt pork with milk gravy, new potatoes, pickled wax beans, brown bread and white, and a great glass dish full of delicious cottage cheese pressed flat and ornamented with the outline of a beech leaf.

Mrs. Boone, flushed and excited, laid down the law from her end of the table. 'There's going to be no supper. Any one who is hungry can make out with bread and milk and doughnuts. Don't one of you dast lay a finger on the cakes or rolls for to-night. Stephen, I mean you particularly,' she said, addressing her young son with vigor.

CHAPTER V

THE WEDDING

That afternoon was the busiest, most exhilarating of any Letty had known. Occasionally dread of the evening almost overcame her so that her hands would become horribly damp and her knees turn to water. The terror passed; she would hasten in her self-imposed tasks.

At last the shadows lengthened. Primrose with Stephen's Max fetched the cows, the men milked and did the remaining chores, finishing with scant time to dress. Then it was that Stephen announced he would like the kitchen for a bath. From earliest spring until actual winter he had for years made use of Diana's Bath in the upper beech wood. 'Why in the world,' queried his mother, 'do you want to put us all out so on the busiest day that ever was?' Stephen was adamant, his mother powerless. One couldn't refuse a bridegroom a bath on his wedding day. Seething with rage, she watched Stephen take down the tin tub from the woodshed nail and drag it into the centre of the kitchen floor. Its location added to her wrath, though, as Stephen told her, it didn't matter to any one but him what part of the kitchen floor he used. Her expression softened as she regarded the battered tin tub. Few people in the countryside had

such a luxury, and she was secretly proud of it. It was not large, and the sides had bulged from old Jaffrey's mighty bulk. All the Boones sang in their baths. Hearing his voice, one could imagine him foaming in his tub, a Viking in a cockleshell.

Stephen laboriously filled the tub with water from the pump, the tea-kettle, and the reservoir attached to the stove. Then, demanding privacy, he was left to himself. For an hour he splashed, growling out at frequent intervals, 'You can't come in, I'm taking a bath,' as he heard sounds of life about the house. He had used Pearline, an innovation suitable, he judged, to the occasion. The package said, 'For the bath,' and he had used it with a lavish hand so that he emerged red and raw from the ritual. Later he shaved, continuing to take his time. Every one needed the kitchen. Primrose shouted that there were fifty-seven varieties of things to be done there. At length he came forth, handsome and sulky, expecting a scolding, and when none was forthcoming he rewarded his womenfolk with one of his alluring smiles. There was in them an unconscious melancholy which could always charm his mother. 'Am I all right?' he asked ingratiatingly. His close-cropped, red-gold curls were still damp, his blue eyes twinkling, his great figure too large for the blue serge suit, his wrists hanging down from the sleeves. His mother thought him handsomer than young Jaffrey and in such a different way. Jaffrey was a regular blacka-

moor, she thought, longing to look on her eldest born, that prodigal, admired and respected.

Dusk fell. No one had engaged the moon, yet there she was blessing beyond expectation. A night in earliest September, soft starlight, now and again a shooting star! Tom paced down the long lines of Japanese lanterns, lighting each as he passed. From the blossoming blue hydrangeas in their pots on the top step, they extended along the gravel walk to the hard maples at the road; then from one maple to the next all the width of the lawn and back to the great old lilacs at the corners of the house. The maples, already touched by early frost, looked like molten gold in candle and starlight.

In the centre of the farther side of the lawn was a tall arch painted white, but almost obscured by the Dorothy Perkins rose which Margaret Boone had planted on her wedding day. She was superstitiously attached to the bush, and indeed it grew with a triumphant luxuriance little the rule in that rigorous climate. The sisters had banked the arch with masses of bracken Tom had brought from the beech wood, with maidenhair from Diana's Bath, with black-eyed Susans in great profusion and sheaves of wild asters whose small blossoms of faded blue shone paler and sweeter in the dim radiance.

Scarcely had Tom finished his office, when the guests began arriving in surreys and in single buggies. In the far distance could be heard their hilarious

voices which fell to sobriety as they approached the Boone farmhouse. Tom, Uncle Lige, and old Jaffrey gave a hand in hitching the horses in the stable yard. After that the guests went to the front door, passing the more familiar back stoop on this solemn occasion. There Mrs. Boone, immense in gray satin of a new and vastly appropriate shade called 'Elephant's Breath,' flanked by her three daughters, hospitably greeted them. Two out of five of the guests murmured, 'The three Graces,' on approach. Occasionally one added smilingly, 'Faith, Hope, and Charity.' Primrose, thinking of nothing but the exciting present, bubbled over with spontaneous gayety; Diana, soothed by the beauty of the night and the simple scene, was determined to make the occasion a success; of the three, Grace was the happiest.

On a murmured hint from Grace, Mr. Plunkett took the arm of Stephen, who leaned dejectedly against the side of the house, and conducted him to the archway. 'The chaplain walked with the condemned man to the very foot of the gallows,' whispered Prim to Diana and started at the furious 'Hush!' which answered.

Music followed; Primrose with her mandolin, the older girls twanging softly their guitars. Diana sang to their playing, her voice indescribably touching in the quiet air. 'O that my love could silently flow,' she sang in the full smooth melody of Mendelssohn.

The front door softly opened and out came little Margaret and Gerald. For a moment they hesitated, timidly regarding the hundred or so guests. 'Go on, dears,' whispered their mother urgently, and they obediently ran on down the steps scattering from pretty baskets opulent black-eyed Susans. Then Letty emerged, lovely as an Eastern houri. From behind her streamed the light from the house lamps, revealing her yellow gown, her arms full of black-eyed Susans, her locks crowned with them. Her dark eyes glowed with sombre fire. She was not now the familiar little Letty, she was the Lettice of the fairy tale whose lovely locks had been a lover's ladder.

Being married took such a short time. Then every one looked at the gifts; a deal of coarse cut glass and hand-painted china with flowers too large and brilliant for an African jungle. All the time the aroma of coffee made nostrils twitch in anticipation. Presently Tom and the girls, helped by young visitors, passed delicious country food — pressed veal, chicken salad, raised biscuits, cake, ice cream.

Old Jaffrey had humbly suggested 'real meat and potatoes,' but Diana had been severe. 'It's vulgar to overfeed,' she had told him.

'I don't know as I mind being vulgar,' he had answered mildly, twinkling at her unabashed.

No wine was served, and the row of old men, talking with extreme deliberation in their tipped-back

chairs on the rear porch, contrasted this with the customs of their youth.

'I'll say nothing against whiskey; it saved my life once,' said old Silas Corse.

'You know what the Good Book says,' went on ponderous Abner Slade. 'Moses said unto Timothy, "Take a little wine for your stomach's sake."'

Uncle Lige snorted. 'Why, Ab,' said he, 'I opine you are lacking in the simplest rudiments of Biblical matters. Don't ye know Moses never clapped eyes on Timothy until they both got to the New Jerusalem?'

Ab was unconvinced. 'Likely I know my Bible better than you do, Lige,' he answered placidly.

Some of the children wanted to play 'kissing games' in an upstairs chamber, but Mrs. Boone suggested the front lawn, where they made a great circle and sang gayly:

'The needle's eye,
The dusts supply
The thread that runs so truly,
Many, alas, that I have passed,
Because I wanted you.'

Stephen and Primrose played riotously, but Letty, afraid of sullying alike her gown and her new dignity, sat beside Mother Boone on the top step. In that community dancing was considered a sinful pleasure, though kissing games were willingly allowed, and many of the older guests expressed disapproval when Tom and Prim started Waverley Wheat, the country

name for Sir Roger de Coverley. Gayly they sang and gayly danced.

> 'O, I must have some of your Waverley Wheat,
> And I must have some of your barley,
> And I must have some of your Waverley Wheat,
> To make a bouquet for Charlie.'

The guests departed leaving the Boones and Letty equally put to it to realize she too was a Boone. Even now there was no time to philosophize. It was the boast of Margaret Boone that a new day brought only its own tasks. Now she regarded her daughters, who were regretfully aware of her thoughts, and then sighing turned to the kitchen. Diana unwillingly followed and sighed too at the vast disorder.

Primrose frowned. She wanted to let the others do the dishes, but her conscience and her affection forbade her. With irritation, she recognized the restraint placed on her actions. One could never be perfectly free if one loved! What a fool she would be to get further entangled! For the twentieth time she resolved not to become too fond of Tom Peebles. All this while she was tying on a large plaided gingham apron.

Letty had disappeared. As Stephen was with Tom, bringing in the funeral chairs hired from the undertaker, and putting them in stacks against the kitchen wall, she could not be love-making. Primrose raised her eyebrows and sniffed at Letty's absence. Diana tartly called Heaven to witness the girl's services were

not needed. 'Hush,' said Grace softly, for there was Letty in their midst looking like a little Cinderella in the faded blue chambray.

Mother Boone gave her an approving smile. 'You needn't have helped,' she said.

Letty did not reply in words, but by her deft movements endeavored to express her gratitude, her undying loyalty, her ambition to please them.

In came old Jaffrey from smudging out carnival and in silence sank his huge frame onto the Turkey-red cushions of the creaking black rocker.

Grace and Diana could remember days when he had been less silent. In their childhood they had listened entranced to slow stories of his boyhood. These they had extracted by prodding and the stories themselves were but a succession of short statements unembellished by adjectives.

'Tell us where you were born, Daddy.'

'In the mountains.'

'What mountains?'

'Blue Ridge.'

'How'd you come to be born way down there?'

'My father's father's father came from 'cross the sea and settled in those parts.'

'What country "'cross the sea"?'

'England. And his father's father, I dunno how many fathers back, came from France. His name was Geoffrey de Bohun. He was a pirate, I make no doubt.'

'How'd you come way up here to these hills?'

'I was in the war, ye know, honeys. Then I come up here with some o' the boys I fit with who lived up this-away. One of 'em was your uncle over to Freedom. He lived right up here. His sister was here too, and when I saw her I made out to stay. I liked her and I liked the hills.'

'Is it nicer here than in the Blue Ridge?'

'Mother's here, so 'tis. But you got to pay more 'tention to what folks think here, so 'tain't.'

One day Margaret went to a Missionary tea, leaving Diana and Grace to keep house with daddy. All the other country children went barefoot, but this was never permitted the little Boones. That afternoon they saw their father sitting on the back stoop clad in checked shirt and ancient jeans and girt about the waist with a hempen rope suggesting an order of pious mendicants. His great bare feet were on the rail, his chair tilted back at a dangerous angle. With Buddha-like calm he gazed into what Diana surmised was the Blue Ridge so distant in space, so remote in years. Open-mouthed the little sisters eyed him, then sat down on the top step and quietly removed neat shoes and stockings. It had been raining and they paddled rapturously in the mud of the driveway. Mother, returning pretty and flushed from her outing, had crimsoned with anger and distaste. Diana, imitated quickly by Grace, sat down in the muddy driveway and pulled short skirts

over dirty little legs, feet peeping betrayingly. Back from the Blue Ridge came father, his magic carpet landing Bump! upon the back stoop. Sheepishly, he drew on socks and boots. All that was twenty years past and old Jaffrey never went barefoot nowadays.

'Letty seems to be quite a worker,' he remarked in his slow, booming tones. Of them all, he best understood Letty and what she was trying to tell them. He felt the inimical attitude of Diana and Prim and, difficult as he found speech, injustice was harder to endure. During the evening, her extraordinary beauty, contrary as it was to all his previous convictions of what was desirable in a woman, had so won upon him that he now felt for her a sympathy amounting to championship.

At his words, Letty flashed upon him a half-tearful, wholly charming smile, and, when she next flew past on her way to the buttery, she contrived a shy touch on his sleeve, a hummingbird contact, seen but unfelt.

One o'clock saw the last task completed. Martin had even laboriously set the breakfast table, doing it as carefully as it was his custom to help his servantless Grace. 'It looks like a wedding breakfast,' laughed Diana, half in mockery, half in pleased appreciation of the touch of elegance which meant so much to her. She was the first to suggest that it was high time for bed. Lighting a small kerosene lamp, she called, 'Come, Prim,' to her frankly yawning sis-

ter, 'Good-night, every one,' and went up the narrow stair.

Letty hesitated, wondering what she ought to do. Then, with a shrug, she took matches from the tin pail tightly covered against mice and saying, 'Good-night!' followed Primrose. She had seen the lamp in the guest room and knew her way. In that gloomy grandeur she felt more than ever like a little shy sparrow. She slipped off her garments and into her nightgown threaded with more of the wide cheap pink ribbon which Diana had decried. Letty snatched it out, rolled it into a neat ball, and tucked it into the corner of her workbasket. Carefully she removed the shams and hung them on the towel rack. She folded the spread. The bed was enormously high; there was a box spring, two hair mattresses, and a vast feather bed. Letty, used to a husk mattress, thought the feathers would be rather warm on such a night. Gazing, an idea took possession of her. She went quickly to the door and locked it. Returning to the bed, she climbed agilely to the top of the footboard. Arms over head she balanced there and then dived into the sea of billows. With an extraordinarily guilty expression, she climbed out of the bed and meekly unlocked the door. After some hesitation, she extinguished the light and raised a shade and window.

When Stephen came, her head had retreated timorously under the bedclothes. She could feel the bed and the floor shake as he moved in the dim room. He

knelt by the bed and Letty, who had forgotten her own prayers, sat up to observe him with reverence mounting to awe as his devotions prolonged themselves. At last she realized he had fallen asleep. She had been born to be a mother and the sight of him stirred her all in a moment to maternal pity. She leaned out of bed and tugged at his shoulder. She could not rouse him until she had slipped out of bed and shaken him vigorously. Heavy with sleep, he rose from his knees and sat dazed on the edge of the bed. She coaxed him to put up his feet, to lie down, pulling at him the while like an industrious ant with a burden many times its size. Satisfied at length that he was comfortable, she lay down. But Stephen was now awake. He stretched out his arms for her. In August Letty had seen a storm gathering on the Boones' Hill. It had advanced like a great gray host of warriors. There was thunder, lightning, rain. Then came the hail and the wheat prostrated itself before it. When it had passed over, she had stolen out to see her pretty nasturtiums. They lay prone; their variegated blossoms pierced through with many arrows, their stalks cut asunder by sharp swords. What was this devastating force? Could this, then, be love?

He slept and Letty lay and trembled. At last she too fell into a light slumber. Toward morning she sat up, broad awake. Stephen was muttering in his sleep. She made out his words with difficulty, 'Tied by the leg.'

Letty slept no more that night.

CHAPTER VI

DIANA'S BATH

Sleep played queer tricks that night with more than one of the Boones. In the room she shared with Primrose, Diana lay staring into the darkness until she made sure her sister was fast asleep. Tenderly she moved from under Primrose's arm which encircled her neck. The sleeping girl sighed rapturously and fell into a deeper slumber. Diana went to the low window and wrapped in her crêpe negligée crouched there looking out into the night still luminous with the sinking moon.

Unlike the others of her blood she had not always loved this farm. In her girlhood days her father had said that her nose had a permanent tilt as if she were forever smelling something unpleasant. That was what the farm meant to her then; the smell of the manure on the men's boots, the horsy smell of their hands, the earth smell of the fields, the stale apple smell of the storeroom — all united into one vast unpleasing odor! With joy, she had gone to the normal school, and had at her vacations felt the old disgust at returning to the rougher life, the endless labor. Teaching first in a suburb of New York, then on Staten Island, she had continued to return for the holidays, because she loved her people, not their

home; because she was dutiful, not because the place called her.

Then had come the summer, now three years gone, which she had spent with young Jaffrey near Rio. Before her vessel had passed Sandy Hook, she was filled, nay, she was suffused, with a poignant nostalgia. Later there was nothing that Jaffrey could do for her, no efforts of his wealthy, adoring wife, no natural interest in her brother's five strong children and that was much, nothing which could ease the pain with which she longed for home. To her surprise she found it was not her family she yearned for; it was for the fields, whether black and fallow or teeming with wheat, it mattered not; it was for the beech wood, for the secret spring and its rapturous murmur, for the overgrown lilacs whose blossoms grew on the highest boughs not to be reached save from the windows of Stephen's and the cubby room. Even the steaming odor of old Lige's boots — these were the things for which she yearned.

She spoke apologetically of her homesickness to Jaffrey. 'The farm, I thought I hated it. Now I find it's bone of my bone. I believe I should die if I knew I'd never set eyes on it again.'

To her amazement Jaffrey, his smoke-colored eyes kindling to fire, answered jerkily, pacing up and down in excitement. 'Not a week I don't dream of it! Not a tree I don't remember! That day we paved the spring and named it Diana's Bath! How we worked,

father and Uncle Lige and the two hired men and I! Those great stones! And Stephen brought a shining pebble and put it in. Wasn't he proud of it, though? I'll die on the old place, Diana, a patriarch of ninety-odd. I'll make my pile here and then — you'll see! I'll found a family, I'll build a mansion in the wood — there'll be a park, tennis courts, a golf course! It shall be Beechwood! No, Beech, plain Beech! I shall be "Boone of Beech,"' and he slapped himself on the chest and stood up to his full height. '"Boone of Beech!"'

If she had been away from the farm, she would to-night have longed for it. Being here, her heart after the manner of woman yearned for what was unattainable. Her thoughts were centred upon another wedding which she supposed had taken place the day before. It held more significance for her than poor Stephen's; she had come so near being the bride! Her heart confessed a tenderness for Amory Vaughan and her intelligence told her in how fair a way his frailer affection had been to strengthen into love. She gave a rueful smile over 'That cat Melissa!' How ashamed the girl had been of that obsolete middle name! She had written it 'Helen M.' She had concealed it as one would a blot upon virtue. But it had not been least among the charms which drew Amory. He found it honey sweet, fitting to her golden loveliness. Now she flaunted it like a banner, signing her notes, 'Thine ever, Melissa,' would to-day couple it with

Vaughan! Let her, then! Diana confessed she couldn't herself have lived up to Amory, played up to his delicacies, shared his artistic life, thrived in the clear ether native to him. Melissa might be compounded of no finer elements than she, but — Heavens, how that girl could bluff! With her capacity for posing, Amory would never guess her spurious coinage. And yet, would Melissa, having secured all she wanted in her marriage, trouble to keep Amory enslaved? Melissa was indolent — well, yes, frankly lazy. Poor Amory! A memory of his kiss on her hair stirred her! Not a kiss because he loved her, but because he thought her hair so well worth kissing.

On an impulse she rose, stole silently from the room and soundlessly down the stairs. The front door was locked, but the key was in it and turned willingly as if in sympathy with her fancy. The gravel walk hurt her bare feet, so she walked beside it through the lush grass. The generations of mountain women from whom she had sprung rose up within her in delight as she passed swiftly, unshod, over the wide lawn, across the dusty road and up through the beech wood. 'Boones of Beech,' she laughed aloud. 'Here is a Boone doing a mighty queer thing at two o'clock in the morning!' It was now dark, but she knew her way along the rugged path up to the spring. Here it was, the dear thing! No Roman emperor had ever a more beautiful bath! The beech trees ringed it round like sentinels posted at discreet intervals. It was embow-

ered in tall bracken, maidenhair lodged in the chinks; she could smell the mint which her wet feet had bruised. The darkness protected her as she disrobed. She gasped as she slipped over the edge into the icy water. Her feet rested on the great flat stones with which the basin had been floored twenty years ago. 'How cold are thy baths, O Romans!' she quoted, shivering as she forced herself down into the icy depths. Then she grew warmer and began to sing, softly at first and, as civilization dropped from her, with delight. There were no words to her song, but it liberated the soul from which it rose. There! She had forgotten her towels, but the friendly bracken would help her as it had done more than once years ago. She was ready now, had started to retrace her steps.

She drew back suddenly, both hands at her heart. She had almost run into a man in the dark.

'Who are you? Bath-Sheba? A goddess of the older world?' the deep, impetuous voice hurried on. 'I wasn't spying, I swear. I heard you singing and truly thought I was bewitched. Resolve my doubts. Tell me, are you human born?'

Diana wrapped her robe closer. She was neither angry nor frightened, but felt she should be one or the other. Without reflection, she answered, 'I am Diana.'

He replied with vivacity, 'Let me not suffer Actæon's fate. Indeed, I but heard the voice of the goddess.'

She walked rapidly down through the beech wood and he after her, not fast enough to seem in pursuit. At the edge she turned and faced him. He held a lantern and now raised it so that they could see each other. Diana noticed with surprise the start he gave. He seemed to recognize her. Or had he found in her black hair, white face, dark eyes, in her excitement and fatigue, a something which was to him a painful reminder? As for her, she saw a man older than herself, blue eyes, a close pointed beard.

'Ahenobarbus, Bronze Beard,' she murmured and turned away. All the time she was thinking how extraordinarily kind he looked, how impulsive, how — well, sympathetic, understanding, were the best words she knew, but not the perfect ones.

As for him, when she started to go on he would not touch her lest he frighten her, but stayed her with his voice and outstretched hands.

'Is that what you were doing there? Bathing in that icy spring to wash away old garments of affection?'

She nodded — 'Though how you guessed —— But I am free again and never, never will be anything else.'

He looked at her uncertainly. 'You are not happy. Can't I help you?' His voice had grown deeper, softer.

'On the contrary, I have just told you I am free, and isn't freedom — well, isn't freedom just the breath of life?'

His face altered. 'What is freedom?' he asked sadly, not as one expecting an answer.

She did not attempt one, but fled across the road, over grassy lawn, to the sanctuary of home. At the porch, she looked back and knew by the twinkling of the lantern that he must be standing where she had left him.

CHAPTER VII

LETTY FINDS HER PLACE

DIANA, wan, hollow-eyed, and latest to breakfast, came down while Uncle Lige was holding forth, his listeners spellbound.

'I opine a prettier contraption of its species was never seen in these regions. It was painted green, and my stars! didn't it go so far as to have boxes of geraniums along each side! I asked him, didn't they get dusty on these roads, and he said he watered them along with the horses. There was a green watering-can hanging there right as a trivet. He was kind of apologetic about being here. Said he came up last night to ask permission to camp in the beech wood, but the sight of the folks convened here scairt him off and he just settled down without a by your leave.

'I asked him could I have a look inside, and he answered according to the ways of a gentleman. My stars! All he'd got inside there! There was a table with drawers, a looking-glass, an oil stove, a cupboard, and a bed. My! But that was a dangerous bed! The narrowest I ever see and he a big hulk of a figure!

'I should think he'd roll off,' suggested Prim, enthralled.

'That was the worst of it,' Uncle Lige answered gloomily, shaking his head. 'No mortal place to roll onto.

'Says I, "What do you aim to travel this way for?"

'And he said, "For recreation," says he. At that it may be I look a trifle blank and he goes on to explain further. "I read," says he, "and betimes I write a trifle. I glory in the beauties of Nature and I smoke. I confess it was in my thought when I set out on my journeyings to question the bucolic mind, but not a mite of time do I get for that. Fact is, I'm put to it whenever the bucolic mind is present to answer the questions it puts to me."

'Well, Boones all,' continued Uncle Lige, 'It won't surprise you any to know that word "bucolic" was so familiar to me it might have been a blood brother or, to be more exact, maybe, a bowing acquaintance, and I said with some severity, "Young man," I said, "there's folks in these wilds can better your vocabulary. Right here in this house, asleep in her chamber, is a young woman who teaches music in Staten Island which is a near neighbor to New York City."

'"What's her name?" asks he, pricking up his ears.

'"Diana," I answers.

'"Diana who?"

'"Diana Boone. And furthermore and notwithstanding all this family is descended from Geoffrey de Bohun, who was a notable pirate of his day and generation."

'"I beg your pardon," he says, seeing I was somewhat put out. "I didn't sleep well. Fact is, you've got a ghost in your beech wood."

'"No ghost," says I. "This place hasn't been settled above a hundred years. 'Tain't old enough for ghosts."

'"It wasn't a very old ghost," he answered; and then he says, "Good-bye, and many thanks for your hospitality."

'I would have had him wait breakfast, but he was all for going, and put off with his green wagon and his geraniums and all else down the road.'

The family, who had been waiting for Uncle Lige to conclude, began to leave the table.

'Who's to drive the folks to the station?' inquired old Jaffrey.

'Not I,' said Prim. 'School begins Monday. I've got to sew all day.'

'Let me,' suggested Letty timidly. 'I want to do some trading in town. My stepfather gave me some money for a wedding present and I want to get some materials for a dress,' she continued.

'Can she handle the team, Stephen?' old Jaffrey asked doubtfully.

'Surest thing you know,' said the boy indifferently — 'if she can drive a horse rake with those brutes of her stepfather's.'

Letty, secure of one point, advanced to the next pleadingly, but with a certain determination. 'Could

we start a little early?' she asked Grace. 'I'd like your advice.'

Grace nodded brightly and instantly all was activity. Little Margaret had scarcely touched her breakfast because of that fearful feeling in the pit of her stomach which always came with a journey. She cried now as she kissed her grandmother good-bye. She could never help crying when she said 'Good-bye' to any one.

The Plunketts climbed into the surrey and settled themselves. Letty jumped in without Tom's help and drove off, proud of showing Father Boone her skill in handling his big horses. She would have liked to give them their heads and gain more time for her errands, but she conscientiously held them back down the long steep hill.

It was early afternoon when she returned. She was tired, hungry, and depressed. In saying good-bye to Grace she felt she had parted with her only sure ally. Father Boone had all the good qualities of a wall, but he was as unlikely as one to exert himself for her. If it came to active fighting, he would be an advantage at her back. In Stephen's other sisters she felt latent hostility. His mutterings of the night before had filled her with panic. He didn't love her, it seemed. To love she had long been unused, but felt a capacity to enjoy it. New clothes were the only weapon which occurred to her.

Mother Boone had her dinner waiting in the warm-

ing oven, but Letty wanted to leave it there until she had opened her parcel.

'No, no,' intervened Diana authoritatively, 'your dinner is half spoiled now. Eat first and then we will admire your bargains.'

Letty's face fell and Diana was furious with herself. 'How can I be so hateful?' she thought. 'Poor, friendless, little waif!'

Letty ate because she was afraid not to and, having choked down what she could, looked timidly at the others.

'We're dying to see!' cried Prim good-humoredly.

Letty had gone forth with five dollars, a sum in those days not to be sneezed at. She had a length of white mohair with a pattern of tiny yellow flowers and a challis of golden brown with a blue figure. There were buttons and thread and sewing silk and a pattern.

Diana took up the pattern. 'The goods are as pretty as pretty can be. But surely you don't intend to use this pattern! It would never do, my dear. You couldn't wear a dress made this way more than two or three months.'

Letty looked bewildered.

Primrose spoke impatiently. 'How silly, Letty! If you're going to have a baby!' she paused.

'But how do I know?' asked Letty, with rising indignation. 'Surely a bride doesn't plan her trousseau for that! And I hadn't any trousseau except the dress Grace gave me' — she was silent, her lip quivering.

'Listen to me, Letty,' said Diana crisply. 'Are you or aren't you going to have a baby?'

Letty's face flamed. A devouring anger consumed her and she shook like a beech sapling in the storm. She tried to find words to express her fury at the smirching insinuation and laid hold on nothing better than a catch phrase of the period. 'I'm not that kind of a girl,' she said with cold distinctness and, leaving her poor little purchases, fled to the awful privacy of the guest room.

Primrose began to laugh. Letty looking like an innocent brown-eyed baby mouthing a naughty phrase struck her as being irresistibly comic. Diana laughed ruefully. Even Mrs. Boone smiled.

'Poor little creature!' said Diana. 'I was a beast.'

'But why did Stephen marry her?' marvelled Primrose.

'Perhaps he's in love with her,' suggested the mother doubtfully.

'Nonsense,' Prim answered scornfully. 'Is that all the wisdom you've gathered in forty years of matrimony? Stephen doesn't know what love is.'

'Do you?' asked Diana coldly.

Prim was silent, and Diana continued wearily: 'It's easy enough to guess why he married her. Her wicked old marplot of a stepfather forced him into it. No doubt he told him he'd compromised the girl and between rage and fear poor Stephen fell into his trap. We helped the affair all we could by our delicacy

about asking questions. We're all, if you like, victims of the old ruffian, Letty most of all, for she'll get scant comfort out of Stephen.'

They were silent for a long minute. Then Diana opened the stairway door and called in her clear, loud voice, 'Letty! Letty! Oh, Letty! Come right down and we'll get at that challis so you can wear it to church on Sunday.'

CHAPTER VIII

A GIFT FROM THE GREEKS

It was a month later, a warm brief afternoon in October. Letty sat on a cushion under the wind-stripped rose, but she was not sewing a fine seam; she was shelling beans, a great bushel of them, leaving the pods in a pile on the ground to be burned and putting the small white beans into a large basket. They were 'missionary beans,' and as Letty's little hands flew, she pondered idly the far-reaching purpose to which they were destined. At the spring planting season, the Sunday school superintendent, a spare old gentleman with fluffy mutton-chop whiskers, had given each 'scholar' a tiny calico bag of beans. In the fall, he would, he promised, buy back at his general store all they had raised and the proceeds would be used for the conversion of the heathen. Father Boone, inclined to proselyting, had taken a sack for each resident member of his family and one each for the absent, for Grace and her family, for Diana, for Jaffrey, his wife, and his five children, who were, he privately suspected, in need themselves of missionaries. How those beans had flourished! The earth had seemed to take a positive interest in missions, and here was Letty shelling them all! 'Missions' always made her think of a woman with bound feet dropping an ador-

able fat infant into a boiling river to be promptly gobbled by an alligator. Or was it a crocodile? Letty loved babies. She shivered and fell to singing a melancholy little song she had heard her mother sing. If Letty had been born a Boone, she could hardly have loved music more, but she had no idea of rhythm and was incapable of singing two phrases in the same key. Start her as true to pitch as you pleased, as soon as you left her to warble alone, she would descend into a minor, infinitely pathetic. Stephen said it was like a robin calling for rain. The good-natured Boones never ridiculed her, but ran her back to the original key when they found her too depressing. Now she sang softly:

'A child sleeps under the rosebush fair,
Soft sigh the leaves on the balmy air,
Sweetly she sleeps and is borne away,
To play with the angels in Paradise,
And the years roll by.'

There were many verses. Into a maiden grew the child.

'She presses her hand to her throbbing breast,
With love's first wonderful rapture blessed.'

And Letty put her grimy, little fist to her gingham-covered bosom and caught her breath to think she was like that, too.

The maiden became a mother, and Letty's voice deepened to a husky tenderness while her face wore the brooding look of a contadina madonna.

So through the verses until the child, maiden, mother, widow, was laid to rest beneath the rose-bush, at which Letty became deliciously sad and saw herself cold, still, wept over by Stephen, loved too late.

Tears in her eyes prevented her seeing Prim until that vigorous young damsel was almost upon her. Her entire body of pupils had escorted her down the dusty road. Half of them had now to retrace their steps while the rest went on swinging their tin dinner pails and flinging stolid 'Hello, Lettys!' 'Good-bye, Primroses!' In school they said 'Miss Boone' punctiliously, but out of hours she was only one of themselves.

She, too, carried a tin dinner pail. Letty rose, her beans finished.

'Look here, Letty. I didn't make that dress for you to work in,' began Prim argumentatively.

'My apron covers it every smitch,' Letty answered, timidly defensive.

'Well,' Prim admitted grudgingly. 'Here comes Stephen,' she added as the boy approached from the beech wood.

Letty struggled out of the gingham apron spilling, as she did so, some of the small, white beans.

'Careful, Letty, another fat baby will be feeding the crocodiles,' admonished Prim in whom Letty had rashly confided.

At that, flurried as she was, Letty just had to put

down her basket and pick up some of the elusive beans.

Stephen, looking absently at the girls, came over and took the basket.

'Stephen,' said Prim sharply, 'isn't Letty pretty in that dress?'

Stephen looked, not at Letty, but at her dress.

'Fine,' said he briefly.

It was a heavy brown linen tucked from top to toe and every tuck was edged with crimson. Letty was a wild rose in it, but Stephen didn't see her. Humble as the girl was, she felt decidedly cross. Even old Lige would have shown more appreciation. She walked haughtily on in advance of brother and sister.

'Let's have supper early, Letty,' called Stephen. 'Choir rehearsal, you remember.'

Naturally, she remembered. She wished there could be some one new in the choir, some one simply wonderful, who would fall dead in love with her and show Stephen what a blind bat he had been.

Letty, Prim, and Stephen went to town that night in a single buggy behind the Little Mare. The Boones were perfectly fearless, but Letty, who had that afternoon revelled in thoughts of an early grave, found actual danger distinctly unpleasant and was horribly afraid of the wicked little horse. The buggy was crowded and Prim had to hold Letty.

No one in that farming community held punctuality a cardinal virtue, but the Boones were a proverb

for lateness. Fast as flew the Little Mare's feet down the long hill, around the curve sentinelled by Letty's stepfather's house, over the first rattling wooden bridge, past sparsely lighted village windows, over the second bridge, turning sharply by the town pump to Main Street and the church, they were yet late comers and heard, as Stephen drew up at the horse block, the wheezy tones of the organ and the voices of the singers.

Letty timorously offered to put the Little Mare in the horse sheds, but it was not safe for any one but Stephen to handle her, so Letty was dispatched to the post office, Prim hurried into the church, and Stephen drove round the side of the building to the horse sheds lying beyond in pitch darkness.

The post office occupied the front of the drug store where every commodity from pills to plows was sold. The postmistress, a woman with short gray hair and steel-bowed spectacles, was busy sorting the letters, while some twenty people, few of whom expected mail, lounged and gossiped with an eye upon what went into the boxes. In the group were several young girls, school friends of Letty, with whom she was no longer on cordial terms. The Boones were considered 'stuck up,' and the feeling was allowed them without rancor, for they were prosperous and of long standing, and Diana, Grace, and young Jaffrey were felt to have shed lustre on the home village. That Letty should 'feel her oats' was a different matter. Her

shyness, which had been unnoticed before her marriage, was now taken for pride. Her uncommunicativeness upon the holy state of matrimony offended. It would be a matter of a decade before Letty's humble origin would be forgotten and she could be granted a share in the Boone pride.

Letty, quite unconscious of such suspicions and anxious not to attract attention, asked softly for Box 218, received a letter and a paper and slipped quietly out of the post office. A few minutes later she stole mouselike into the church and seated herself in its unlighted body. Three swinging lamps illumined the choir loft where some dozen singers of all ages were practising a simple anthem.

This region had been settled largely by Welsh. Margaret Boone's father, John Haynes, had come from Wales, and among the older residents there were many living who had themselves emigrated in their youth. Twice a year a sermon was preached in the ancient Celtic tongue. These people, intensely industrious, good managers, frugal but not ungenerous, had too their finer qualities. Their love of beauty was shown in the names they gave their daughters, Edwina, Enid, Breta. They were without exception powerful, sweet singers. The women despite their hard lives retained their youthful good looks up to middle age. They were short, sturdy, with cheeks like roses and the blackest of eyes and hair. Even in old age they did not fade; they became withered and

wrinkled like good red apples sound at the core. But blossom as they might in the heyday of their youth, not one of them was a match for the Boones whose great size and extraordinary beauty had come a double heritage from mountaineer father and handsome Welsh mother.

The male quartet was practising now. Stephen sang the first tenor and an ancient blind man with a beard reaching to his waist took the second. His face was ethereal and his thin voice still thrillingly sweet. 'Only give him a harp,' Diana had once said musingly — 'a harp and a kind youth to bear it for him.' The first bass was a tall, spare fellow with nutcracker jaws. He was a good reader and a passionate lover of rhythm so that he would stamp heavily with an enormous foot on the accented beat and sway his big frame at the lesser. Making the best of a bad thing, the choir had made him master. He would direct in any case. Let him have the name, too, was the generous decision.

The second bass was a little Welshman with fierce mustaches and a frowning brow. Letty wondered idly what had made him such a success with women. Three times married to devoted wives; between one marriage and another — and the man was still young — he had so fascinated the prettiest girl in town that, when he fixed on a wealthier bride, she sat at her window weeping like Mariana of the Moated Grange.

The anthem broke off with a discussion as to the

meaning of *rallentando*. 'Faster! It's the opposite of *ritard*,' urged the rhythmic basso.

Stephen shook his head sullenly. 'It doesn't make sense that way,' he argued. Suddenly his face brightened with his beautiful disarming smile. 'Sure. Let's sing it faster,' he said pleasantly, and turned to tweak the long braid of the young organist. 'Fire ahead, Jennie,' he ordered.

Letty held the letter up to read the address. It bore a foreign stamp, was postmarked Rio de Janeiro, was addressed to Stephen. Letty burned with conviction that this letter would change their whole future. She surmised mightily and could scarcely wait for choir rehearsal to end. She determined, however, to endure her suspense until they were all at home.

The old janitor, a little gray Welshman with whiskers which twitched like a pussy-cat's, stole in and seated himself at the end of Letty's pew, where he fell fast asleep. He was lonely, thought the girl. Or perhaps he was afraid of her being so. He seemed to enjoy human nearness and he was an old dear, but mercy! how he snored! At last even the choir singers were disturbed.

'Letty, Letty!' called Stephen in mock severity, 'quit that snoring. How're we going to tell it from Eben's bass?'

Letty loved Stephen to joke with her. She was glad he hadn't shouted loud enough to wake the poor old man.

Now rehearsal was over. The Boones, as usual in no hurry, put out the lamps for the janitor, straightened the chairs in the loft, distributed hymn books, and piloted the old fellow out of the church, waiting while with sleepy dignity he locked the door with a ponderous key.

'Any mail?' asked Mother Boone when the girls entered the house, leaving Stephen to unharness the Little Mare.

'"Farm and Fireside" and a letter from Rio for Stephen,' Letty answered laconically.

Old Jaffrey fidgeted, rose, walked to the kitchen door, and peered out into the frosty night. 'Hurry up, boy,' he called.

Stephen did not answer, but soon joined them. Letty held out the letter. He opened it clumsily. Inside was a short note and a draft. Stephen read the note before examining the draft.

'Dear old chap,' it began. 'So you're married! Well, here's luck and happiness to you and the young lady. I'd meant to do something to help you on with your music this fall. I take it you're no longer headed in that direction. Just the same, I'll send the money to Letty for a wedding present. Anita and I wish you both the best of everything including five as hearty young Bohuns as ours.

Your affectionate brother

GEOFFREY DE BOHUN

'He spells it Geoffrey now,' said Prim, looking over Stephen's shoulder. 'And look at the "de Bohun."'

The boy handed the draft to Letty without looking at it.

'A thousand dollars!' she read in an awed whisper.

'What *shall* you do with it?' cried Prim eagerly.

Letty took a few minutes for reflection. Every one was quiet. Every one was looking intently at her. Uncle Lige's spectacles were pushed up onto his forehead. His mouth gaped.

Letty spoke confidently. 'I'll buy a piano. Stephen and I will go to Buffalo and buy a good one. The old organ doesn't help him any. I don't see' — she continued rapidly — 'the work's so slack now, I don't see why Stephen shouldn't go to the city once a week for lessons!' She looked intrepidly about her.

Primrose clapped her hands. 'Bravo, Letty!' she cried.

Stephen saw Letty's eyes shining up at him. 'You good little girl,' he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. 'You good, generous, little thing!'

CHAPTER IX

THE ENCOUNTER

That evening, so crisp and clear in the Alleghany foothills, drew in early over Staten Island with penetrating fog and drizzling rain. Diana, enveloped in a dingy waterproof, her spirits attuned to the dreary patter of the drops, boarded the ferry. Beneath she was gorgeous in a blouse of écru lace worn with an accordion-pleated skirt of red taffeta. She was to dine with Amory and Melissa Vaughan in Central Park West. It would be her first sight of them since their marriage and she wondered irritably why she had been so stupid as to come. She sat out on the chill, deserted deck and brooded over her folly while she had her black oxfords polished by the lame bootblack. She looked so firm and determined that the Italian boy did a particularly good job in disposing of Staten Island mud. At the same time his beauty-loving nature made him take pleasure in serving this handsome girl. The wind had whipped stray locks of black hair about her face and the damp rain had curled them into heart-gladdening ringlets. Her cheeks and lips were as scarlet as though painted. She was telling herself that though she had not loved Amory he had been so nearly in love with her that his detachment constituted a grievance. Toward Melissa, who had

removed him in that impersonal way in which an adult takes from childish fingers a bit of too valuable bric-à-brac, she directed the forceful current of her wrath. She tried honestly to stem it. She reminded herself that she couldn't have kept Amory in love with her. He was too fine, too exquisitely the artist. He would have winced at a thousand contacts she enjoyed. Amory at the farm! Amory and a pile of soggy pancakes! Well, he'd be sick at his stomach, that was what! As she did often, she wondered again if Melissa would hold him. She had all that went with him securely in her grasp; she was of all women the most indolent. How she would ache if she must keep perpetually that pose which had secured her artist husband!

Some thoughts of Diana circled about the stranger of the beech wood and these increased her uneasiness. Often and often she had wondered about him and had come to the conclusion that, if she had shown folly in their encounter, she had shown more in making no effort to repeat it. There was that about him which was so wild, so out of the ordinary as to set him apart from all she knew of men. Yet it was this very strangeness to which she felt a counterpart in her own nature. It was his impulsive, fiery quickness which set her longing. Besides, he had looked so extraordinarily kind. Diana's life encountered so much that was not kind.

With a bump which pitched her half out of her seat,

the boat landed at South Ferry and Diana mechanically entered the Subway which with much noise and ostentation hustled her up to Ninety-Sixth Street. She was again frowningly absorbed with Amory and Melissa and did not observe the intent gaze of a man who sat opposite. Nor did she see him follow her the short distance from the train to the Vaughan's apartment-house door and enter the foyer almost at her heels. Without a glance about her, Diana walked to the desk, said a few words to the attendant, and was carried upward by the elevator. The man who had followed her went to the desk and gave an order.

As Diana stepped from the elevator, Amory met her with outstretched hands. If she had felt for him a touch of malice, it vanished instantly. She had half forgotten how frail he looked. He was so fair and his eyes were the faint blue of wild asters. A slight deformity of the right hip detracted from his insignificant height. With relief, Diana felt that she could at last categorize her feeling for Amory. It was indeed that of a sister, though more robust than that she held for Jaffrey and Stephen who were so obviously less in need of protection.

Melissa was framed in the doorway speaking in her husky, low voice with its touch of faint amusement.

'A man, Diana, telephoning this instant as ever is! "Was Miss Diana Boone dining here to-night? When would she be leaving?" I supposed about ten. Was that right?'

Diana, perfectly at sea, nodded. Melissa exuded curiosity. It was rather fun to have Melissa in one's own boat and never guessing Diana her shipmate.

'Such a pleasing voice — very cultured,' wheedled Melissa.

'Hasn't he?' Diana answered cordially and turned to what was really the business of the evening, the inspection of the purchase price of Melissa. Item, a charming apartment, seventh floor for Amory's studio, furnishings rare and costly, better still of impeccable taste; item, a colored butler; item, clothes, certainly, and jewels; item, the last visible — was it asset or drawback from Melissa's point of view? — a husband, delicate, sensitive, not easily understood.

Melissa herself had grown lovelier; her honey-colored hair, her large brown eyes which had the velvety flatness of a pansy, her short upper lip, the healthy pallor of her complexion, were greater claims to beauty than Diana had remembered. She had gained weight; her contours were more gracious. She wore a gown of sapphire velvet, daring for the modest first decade of the century. She was a full half head taller than Amory.

For all her state, Diana's natural shrewdness told her that Melissa was ill content. Back of her brief pleasure in showing off lay restlessness. The slow, melting voice wanted to hurry, but Melissa held it back, kept herself quiet with an iron grip. Rather to the girl's dismay, she found herself sorry enough for

Melissa to forgive her. After all she didn't want what the other's predatory nature had taken. Perhaps Melissa didn't want it either.

'What shall you do, now, Melissa?' she asked curiously. 'Servants, and such a perfect home?'

Melissa's face clouded. 'There are hundreds of little things servants can't do properly,' she answered slowly. 'Music, too. I'm to study with Oscar Saenger.' She paused. 'I don't know about social affairs. We *could* go in any set, but Amory likes the queerest people!' She lifted her hands and dropped them despairingly into her lap.

There was an awkward little pause. Amory broke it, smiling. 'Melissa doesn't, you gather, care for my friends and the people she wants to know bore me frightfully. I'm willing to dine out now and then, but naturally I don't dance. What with music, books, and my poor efforts to amuse her, life shouldn't have too much ennui?' He looked wistfully at Melissa, who sat gazing at her lap, her lower lip caught petulantly by her firm white teeth. She wouldn't help him and Diana couldn't. Something, however, had to be done, so she humbly offered Alla Nazimova for their consideration.

Leaving at the stroke of the clock was rather obvious, but Diana's thoughts had been busy with the telephone message. Could it, she wondered, be her Bronze Beard? She refused Amory's offer of escort and Melissa warningly shook her head lest he repeat it.

As she passed through the foyer, a man rose from an ornate high-backed chair and followed her to the entrance. Diana's heart beat suffocatingly fast. He held the door open for her and stood aside as she passed through with a curt nod of thanks. He followed her.

'Diana Boone?'

'Yes?' she asked, hostility in her voice.

'You have not, I believe, forgotten me?'

She did not answer. He went on more rapidly. 'This is a strange way to speak to you. If you were a young girl, it would be unforgivable. But we met first in a strange way, and I've blamed myself ever since for letting you slip as swiftly out of my existence as you had entered it. Now I see the reward of Virtue can be great. Also the poet lied when he said Opportunity had no back hair. Aren't you going to say something, Diana Boone of the enchanted wood?'

'I don't,' said Diana evenly, 'know how to talk to you.'

'Then listen, but not in such an unfriendly spirit. Seeing you unexpectedly — and then waiting three hours in that fake fifteenth-century chair whose only plausibility lies in its truly medieval discomfort — has made me a bit beside myself. To-morrow I'll come armed with credentials and heading a procession of reputable citizens, but truly I can't wait for to-morrow. I want at least to pave the way to-night. Tell me that you are heart whole.'

'I will tell you,' she said, enraged but laughing, 'I will assure you that I believe you are an escaped lunatic.'

'Now that's not kind,' he said in an injured voice.

'Nonsense!' she said with vigor. 'You'd no right to speak to me. You're forcing yourself upon me. It's not decent of you. Do you go about frightening defenceless women?'

He gave a short, amazed laugh. 'If you weren't afraid in that haunted beech wood, with that pale moon setting, with all the forces of Nature against you, can you hope to persuade me that I frighten you here where raising your voice will bring you a policeman? There is one yonder,' and he jerked his head toward a burly bluecoat.

'It's not the same,' countered Diana. 'Nothing could frighten me in my beech wood. Not, I think, the Devil and all his angels. And I'm not afraid in the way you mean.'

'How then?' he asked roughly.

'I can't tell,' she said simply. Gathering forces she went on: 'You make me feel breathless. We Boones are slow, slow, I tell you. I think you're crazy, you know, but if you aren't, you'd better be a little less impetuous.'

They paused before the kiosk.

'Where do you live?' he asked abruptly.

'Uncle Lige told you. On Staten Island.'

'I've hunted for you, every spare minute the fortnight I've been back in town.'

'I've been there all the time.' Their voices were so loud that two women entering the Subway turned to stare, but neither Diana nor her stranger observed them.

'I'm coming home with you,' he said.

'Come, if you must, but don't be absurd.' 'Don't,' she meant, 'be violent.'

Conversation in the Subway was impossible. The lights, the noise, the crowd jarred shockingly upon them. He found her a seat and stood strap-hanging before her. She was painfully conscious of his frowning gaze, of his nearness. 'I'm crazy, too,' she said to herself with conviction. 'I'm thirty years old and I've fallen in love with a red-bearded lunatic. How shall I handle the creature? How shall I handle myself?'

The crowd thinned at Forty-Second Street, leaving vacant seats, but her stranger held to his strap. Diana motioned him to an empty place across the aisle. He regarded it absently.

'I want to be near you,' he said, bending over her. 'I'll wait until I get a seat next.'

'Ridiculous,' she thought and looked about to see if he had been overheard.

At Fourteenth Street came his opportunity. Diana sat beside him feeling as though she were molten fire encased in a sheath of ice. Amid her hurrying thought she found regret over her ugly waterproof. That made her glance at his outward apparel and, seeing him well groomed, her lips drew down discontentedly.

They could talk on the ferry. Not waiting to be asked, Diana led the way to the wild weather of the lower deck. The wind had increased in violence and dashed the cold rain on their faces. They tasted on their lips the bitter salt spray.

'Diana,' the stranger was saying gently, 'Diana, dear good Diana. You don't know anything about me. If you knew all that others do, the facts wouldn't tell you much. Facts are always misleading and the man others know isn't the true Me. In plain words, Diana, I am mad about you and I want you to read me and to love me through what you see yourself of me, through your own eyes, not through a photograph the world might show you.'

In her excitement she gave an uncontrollable shudder.

'Listen,' she said. 'I know there is a great deal to be said for that way of forming opinions. But it can't be done. The impression we make on others, the way society looks on us, the fifty faces we bear for each of fifty friends — they count too largely. So far I've just what I see to go by and it doesn't tell me much. Only that you are very violent, very impetuous, a man of education, and I believe, though I've had no reason for doing so, that you can be beautifully kind. After all, Uncle Lige told me as much of you as I could see for myself.'

He laughed. 'If you are determined not to "love me for myself alone," I may as well out with the rest.

A plain enough story, professor at Columbia; sociology is my line. I'm forty and free to marry, but there's an ugly story about that for you to hear. As for you, I know you to your marrow. You're fine and keen like a well-tempered sword in the sheath it has worn too thin.'

She spoke abruptly. 'All along I've called you Bronze Beard, all the name I had for you but "my stranger." For all I know you're like a Nero. You're trying to vanquish me. Then you'd bind me to your chariot wheels. You don't know what freedom means to me. I tried to tell you once. And I can't be hurried either. We Boones are the "slow Boones." I can't be carried away by a stream in spate.'

'I'm sorry. Truly I will be patient. And I'm conventional enough myself, I suppose,' he added largely; 'I may even claim to be respectable.'

'I don't know your name!'

'Roger; Roger Wentworth,' he returned.

A light broke in upon her. 'You gave a course for teachers last winter. I didn't go. I'm not interested in your subject.'

Only the docking of the ferry saved her from his attempt at her conversion.

'Don't come farther with me,' she urged.

'Why not?' he queried.

'It's a dark street. If you will have the truth, I daren't walk it with a madman.'

He drew back, furiously angry. 'Do you mean that?' he asked threateningly.

She thought she had lost him. 'No, no,' she said, putting her hand on his arm. 'Come with me if you will.'

There were only three blocks, but the mud was heavy and the way dimly lighted. The street was under repair and red lanterns edged a path so narrow that he must perforce go behind her.

The door of the apartment house was unlocked. He followed her into the vestibule. 'Do you have a flat alone?' he asked.

'With two other teachers,' she answered defensively.

'Then I may come in for a minute or two? I've been very good just lately.'

Diana grudgingly said 'Yes.' She wished he had angered her by forcing an entrance. There was no elevator and they climbed together the two flights of creaking stairs. Light and active as she was, her heart pounded so that she had at last to take the arm he offered for support. At the door she handed him her latch key. Inside it was very still. 'Have you a match?' she asked in a whisper.

He lit the gas in the bracket and looked about him curiously. 'Your room is like you,' he commented.

It was really hers more than the other teachers'. The few pieces of old mahogany she had bought at country auctions. There was an old-fashioned grand piano and on it a jar of tiny brown chrysanthemums. Above hung a water color of junks and sampans at

sunset in an Eastern harbor. Small as was the apartment it was so rigorously clean and so meagrely furnished that it bore the face of chastity.

Wilfully she misunderstood him. 'It is a plain room. He thinks me plain,' she thought bitterly. She slipped off her dowdy raincoat and stood before him in her creamy blouse and red, bouffant skirt. Her face was too thin, her eyes too large, but they were deep and black and full of mystery. She dragged off her shabby hat, and her dark hair waved simply over ardent brows which, delicately arched, gave her an exotic look. The odors of the rain and the night, the subtile emanation of the girl, made a perfume more elusive than that of fragrant blossoms. She was like a glowing poppy, sweet only to the initiated.

He looked at her as if ahungered he saw bread.

'He won't touch me,' thought Diana. 'He didn't on the dark, unwatching street. He won't touch me.'

Then his arms were about her. For a moment they found her immobile. Afterward, as the still surface of the lake breaks into a million ripples under the sharp arrows of the rain, her composure left her. She clung to him desperately. He kissed her hair and she put up her lips submissively. They embraced ardently as though their souls, momentarily fused, would impress their union upon their plastic bodies.

'Roger, I like your name,' she murmured in a drowning whisper.

'Di! Is that you?' came a sleepy voice from the adjoining room.

The embrace ended as abruptly as it had begun.

'Yes, I have a guest,' Diana called out in a firm voice.

There followed a pause during which they regarded each other intently.

'You see,' said the man. They were silent again. He moved to go. 'May I come to-morrow?'

'No, no,' she answered vehemently. 'Not before the end of the week. Friday, if you like. And I have friends you must please. It matters to me what they think of you.' It had flashed upon her that she would expose him to Melissa. If the virus took, for her life's sake let it be soon. 'But until then, no more,' she added with an outward gesture of arm and palm as though to thrust him from her.

The door closed after him. She listened while the stairs creaked. Her roommate was, she suspected, not half asleep. She couldn't face her curiosity, couldn't tolerate her presence. Throwing herself on the narrow horsehair sofa, she burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER X

A MOMENTOUS JOURNEY

The farmers of the Alleghany foothills always spoke of going to town to do their 'trading,' and the phrase was literal, for the business was a barter of commodities and little actual cash changed hands. The farmer did indeed receive a check at the cheese factory where he hauled his milk, but his wife exchanged at the stores her eggs and home-churned butter for groceries, clothing, and whatever else she needed. The purchase of a little place in town was the ultimate ambition of each heart. There one could have a garden, keep chickens and a cow, and eke out a living with the scanty savings in the bank. Five hundred dollars at that time seemed a respectable principal. Old Jaffrey, the richest farmer in a circuit of many miles, was worth some fifty thousand, but, as Prim said, he was 'land poor and horse poor'; and though all actual needs were amply supplied the Boones were never in funds.

Thus young Jaffrey's gift quite overwhelmed the household at Beechwood Farm. The old people refrained carefully from a hint as to its use and Letty, who would at that time have yielded to any show of authority, found her plan unopposed. Before they slept, it was decided that she and Stephen should go

to Buffalo on the following Saturday to purchase the piano and to interview a music master. Primrose, who had her first month's salary check, was to accompany the young people. She walked on air all the week thinking of it and Letty was not behind her in that.

They were to take the milk train which left the station nine miles away at six o'clock in the morning. While Primrose and Letty got breakfast, Stephen went out into the night to harness the horses. The girls spoke in whispers so as not to waken Uncle Lige whose room was over the kitchen. They were too excited to eat and could swallow only their hot coffee. Stephen could eat, but he could not be quiet. He was in tremendous spirits and laughed and joked as they sat at the kitchen table with the shadows of the rafters falling across their faces.

It was pitch dark when they drove out of the yard and they were silent as Stephen cautiously guided the team around the bend and down the steep rough road. They were strong brutes, well-rested, and had enjoyed a breakfast of oats, so were disposed to shy at the black shadows of the rail fences. Farther down were whole trunks of trees, uprooted, set on end, guarding the fields like giant octopi, horribly grotesque. Antony and Cleopatra tore around the knoll and over the bridge as if pursued by demons and would not slacken pace until they had clattered over the third bridge at the far confines of town. Letty

had sat very still. She was sure Stephen could manage the team, but, if she did get tossed out, she wouldn't reach Buffalo that day as ever was.

Now dawn was approaching and in the wan light they could see stretching before them a steep hill, shorter than their own but more precipitous. Nestled beneath was a farmhouse, low and long, the color of ripe strawberry preserve. Halfway up the hill was a white house with green trimmings, red barns massed at the back, all as beautifully kept as if it had been in New England. The road here was edged by low stone walls, elsewhere almost unknown in this region of great farms and few laborers. The horses toiled up the heartbreaking ascent where the road led through a pine wood in which a second twilight enveloped them and on to the top of Fairview Hill. There in a clearing stood Fairview Farm with its one great pine before the house. The wind blew unceasingly, cold on the warmest day, penetrating the traveller with gloom.

From Fairview Farm they swept down a gradual descent of three miles to the station. The wind blew no longer, and so much kinder was the air that the deciduous trees, which were stripped bare in the Boones' high country, were clothed here with scanty garments of amber and faded red. One tall beech, standing alone with branches only a few feet above the ground, was completely covered with small, beautiful yellow leaves.

'Our beeches aren't half so pretty,' sighed Letty regretfully.

'I like them just as well now as in summer,' said Prim defensively. 'Their smooth gray trunks, their beautiful branches. You can see them better without their leaves. They're like beautiful women ——' She stopped, flushed and embarrassed.

Not far from the road lay a tiny lake like a sapphire set in the gold of beech trees. Wild asters and blue gentians bloomed in pathetic beauty about it. So lonely was all this region and so widespread was the land before them that the three travellers unconsciously breathed more freely.

At last they saw down the long street of the hamlet the ugly station. Antony abhorred trains, so the team was left at a friend's house, and the three pilgrims, who had set out dressed in their best and who were now weary, bedraggled, and half famished, walked on to the railroad.

'I'm starved,' groaned Prim.

'So am I,' Stephen agreed gloomily.

Letty, like Mrs. Swiss Family Robinson, drew forth sandwiches from her ample bag. She had made them of large baking-powder biscuits, split and thickly spread with butter and filled with strips of white chicken.

'Good for you,' said Stephen and gobbled one at a mouthful.

'Don't give him another until we've finished ours,'

advised Prim. 'It's the only way to manage this family.'

'I made twice as many for Stephen,' confessed Letty.

The train came. They need not have hurried so, for the milk cans had to be put on board. It was a wandering, desultory train and stopped, Prim said, at every fifth tree. Most of the stations were three-sided sheds and there were few passengers, but at every halt great cans of milk were lifted on. There was no conversation among the young people. Stephen had turned over a seat and sat facing the girls. He went promptly to sleep and stayed so through the weariful journey.

Primrose thought about Tom Peebles, who was in Boston for his last year at the Harvard Medical. If he came home to vote he might drive over to Beechwood. Election Day was next Tuesday.

Letty's thoughts circled about Stephen like doves about their cote. She throbbed with delight at giving him his heart's desire. She would have preferred to be handing him a baby, but she had no illusions as to his preferring a grand piano. Surely Stephen would now begin to love her.

Letty and Prim were surprised because the train was late, but Stephen, waking suddenly and appearing quite alert, assured them that the milk train always was late, that the schedule was purely ornamental, and that if the train were on time a catas-

trophe was bound to follow; either a collision with another as gently aimless or at the least heart failure on the part of the engineer. For all that, the stores were just opening as they walked up to Main Street and took a car for the address of a teacher of whom Stephen knew through Diana. He had given them an appointment and Stephen wished to have his opinion before going farther.

The master, a well-known baritone, a composer and choir director, viewed with mild amazement Stephen's gigantic figure, but when he heard his voice his manner changed. Unlike that of most untrained singers the boy's voice was not strained, but because of its immense power had been held back lest it drown all other voices. Nor had he contracted many bad mannerisms. Indeed, it was unspoiled, a virgin voice. He had, too, intelligence, a bearing which would become majestic. Encouragement he doled out with a niggardly hand.

Little praise as he gave, there was enough to make Primrose look with momentary awe on Stephen and to fix in Letty's gentle breast the first arrow of doubt for the future. Had she done well? she asked herself now as she was to do so many times.

Karl Hecht had advised them on the matter of the piano and on an impulse he went with them to choose it. They found at the salesrooms one slightly used, a beautiful four-foot-six baby grand with a tone of singular clarity. It was theirs for five hundred, and

they parted from Karl Hecht with the bearing of victors.

They lunched on unaccustomed dishes in the restaurant of a department store and then Primrose set herself to rid them of Stephen. She and Letty wanted to shop and couldn't be made miserable by trailing a disconsolate male. The boy was not loath to leave them and, on arranging to meet the girls for the late afternoon train, he went to his first sight of the moving pictures.

That afternoon seemed unreal to Letty. She had never before been in a city and the noise, the bustle, the haste frightened almost as much as they exhilarated her. Primrose bought a coat and a floppy brown hat and insisted on Letty's purchasing a navy blue suit. Letty, feeling that the thousand dollars was all for Stephen, was disposed to be miserly, but Prim was forthright with her and not to be withstood. They wandered down Main Street in their fine feathers, a handsome sleek pheasant and a pretty shy wren. Presently they saw the sign of a beauty parlor and Prim stopped stock still.

'Let's go in,' she cried, mischievous, eager.

Letty looked frightened. 'What on earth for?'

'To have our hair dressed, silly. Look at these,' waving a hand toward the three elaborate coiffures in the window display.

'There wouldn't be time,' Letty objected.

Primrose's eyes sparkled. 'Nonsense,' she said, and entered, leaving Letty to follow meekly.

Prim insisted that Letty's hair should be done first. The woman exclaimed over the girl's beautiful locks. 'You have too much hair, Miss,' she said, frankly adding, 'I'll give you fifteen dollars for twenty-seven inches of it.'

Letty sighed. Stephen never noticed her hair. There was certainly too much of it for this fashion of puffs. She could do a lot with fifteen dollars.

'All right,' she said. The woman approached with her shears. Letty shuddered. The woman laid the beautiful brown tresses on a tissue paper where they shimmered under the electric light, all flecks and points of amber and gold and rich autumnal coloring. Letty wanted to kiss them good-bye, but that was out of the question under the mocking eyes of Prim. The woman dressed her hair, still long and abundant, and changed the girl into a little French print.

Next Primrose was under the skilful hands and Letty had begun to fidget about train time. Primrose seemed strangely unhurried and Letty couldn't very well curtail her toilet after having had her own done first.

'Couldn't you hurry a little?' she asked the woman timidly. 'We shall barely make the train. We're from out of town,' she added quite needlessly.

'Oh, that's perfectly all right,' interposed Prim with easy assurance. 'We'll walk fast or we can take a car.'

The work was done in a tiny booth with just room for the three. Letty went once and again to see the clock in the main room. She didn't like to ask Prim

to look at her watch for fear of slackening the hairdresser's speed.

'Don't wander about like a lost soul, Letty, you make me nervous,' Prim commanded.

At last the coiffure was complete and Primrose, not guessing that what had vastly improved Letty was far from becoming to herself, paid the bill and chatted while she unhurriedly donned coat and hat. Out in the street a car marked 'Depot' bore down upon them. 'Too crowded,' objected Prim and held Letty back with a firm hand.

'Prim, we'll certainly miss that train,' cried Letty, anxious almost to tears.

'We'll walk,' said Prim placatingly. 'Perhaps a car will overtake us.' Letty flew along with light quick steps, but long-legged Prim dawdled in the rear as became a 'Slow Boone.'

'I can't hurry so with all these parcels,' she complained. 'My old coat weighs a ton.'

Letty already laden would have offered to help, but knew Prim wouldn't let her. She was a pigmy beside the girl and it would be ridiculous.

'If we miss that train, father and mother will worry to death and Stephen will be as mad as hops,' she said with energy.

'He'll be full of rage and jealousy like the Moor,' agreed Prim.

'You mean to miss the train!' exclaimed Letty, aghast.

'I must say you didn't grasp my idea very quickly,' Prim answered amiably. 'We're going to stay at the Ordway across from the station. I've been there with Diana and mother. To-night we'll go to the theatre and take the train home in the morning.'

'But, Prim, why on earth didn't you say so before? If you planned it all out ——'

'I didn't plan it out, you little idjut. It never occurred to me until I saw how stylish we looked. I'm like a tiger that has tasted blood and I'm not going home until I've had more of it. I haven't been to the theatre but five times in my life. Have you *ever* been, Letty?'

'Just to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in a tent and once to a medicine show,' Letty admitted. 'But I'm not going to miss the train if I can help it.'

'Yes,' said Prim firmly; 'I can't stay without you and stay I will, so you must, too.'

Letty looked miserable. Her stirrings of conscience were faint. She didn't think the elder Boones would worry much, but she did dread making Stephen angry. He had an awful temper. However, it was already past train time and there was nothing for it but to stay. A hope surged up in her that Stephen might have waited for them. In that case they could pacify him and the three spend a tremendous evening. It would really be more fun without him, though. Stephen was nowhere to be seen. They waited a quarter hour near the entrance and then

Letty suggested looking up the morning train home. It seemed that on Sunday there was none, only the two o'clock accommodation. Letty was cast down, but Prim was more jubilant than ever and gayly led the way to the old-fashioned hotel across the street where the Boones stayed on their infrequent trips to town.

In the country eyes of the two girls there was nothing tawdry in the faded splendor of their room. The coarse Nottingham lace curtains, the red wall-paper, the red carpet, the ugly maple furniture, satisfied them perfectly. If Primrose had been with Diana, she would have been submissive, but beside the inexperienced Letty she felt a woman of the world. She took all the care in the world of the younger girl, escorted her to the dining-room, saw she had the better seat for observing the others, and ordered their dinner. A corpulent negro waited on them. He stood behind Letty's chair and so overawed her that she could scarcely eat. When they had finished, Primrose sailed to the desk with Letty after her like a full-rigged schooner with a dory in tow.

She had registered there with a timidity she had been careful to hide from Letty. She had heard women without baggage were not allowed in hotels. Their many parcels had apparently satisfied the clerk, though he had looked sharply at them. Now she trembled not at all.

'What good shows are there in town?' she asked in her loud, clear voice.

The clerk, all pimples and sophistication, was disposed for a mild flirtation with these pretty country girls, but his assured 'Well, dearie,' met with such a fierce stare from Prim's hawk eyes under the black arch of the Boone brow that he swallowed with difficulty and began over again with a genial 'Well, young ladies, there are two musical comedies and one drama I can recommend besides the usual vaudeville shows.'

'What is the drama?' Prim demanded at her stateliest.

'Spartacus the Gladiator.'

The girls looked at each other with delighted surprise. Here was an old friend of the family. Both girls knew all about Spartacus. Had they not read his speech in the eighth grade? Letty had a fleeting remembrance of Stephen's being so eager to deliver it with unction that he had forgotten to give page and title. How fierily he had burst out, 'Ye call me chief, and ye do well to call him chief' — ! and there Miss Beckett had halted his impassioned utterance and he had had to begin properly to the accompaniment of mild titters, his own crimson flushes, and Letty's deep sympathy.

Letty pressed close to Prim. 'I'd liefer see that than the musical comedies.'

Prim graciously assented. Had it been another title she would have stood out for music, but she too had a leaning toward the bold insurgent.

The theatre was far distant, but Primrose suggested walking. She knew quite well how to reach the place on foot, but the cars confused her, though she said nothing of her reason to the footsore Letty, for the girl's admiring dependence was dear to her heart.

The girls never knew whether or not they had seen a good play. They had no standards, they were youth and enthusiasm embodied. It would have been a dire performance which could fail to please. They were enchanted with woe, they wept delightedly over the sorrows of the luckless Spartacus.

Blowing her nose ferociously in the lobby, 'Not so very cheery,' commented Prim.

'No,' agreed Letty; adding, 'But it certainly was uplifting.'

Their excitement sustained them on the long trudge over unaccustomed city pavements. On the dark street near the hotel, two young loiterers frightened Letty by keeping at their heels and repeating in a sinister whisper, 'Hello, girls! Where you going, girls?' Primrose, feeling Letty's hand tremble on her arm turned upon them like a tigress ready to spring.

Weary as they were, the two girls talked half the night and slept late in the morning, delightfully released from their accustomed chores.

Primrose refused to go to church on the ground that she could go at home. They paid their hotel bill, checked their parcels at the station, and went for a walk. They sauntered miles, listening to the bells

chiming over the city and gazing with interest at the churchgoers who made an unconscious fashion show from which Prim gleaned the styles of the day. 'Your skirt is too long, Letty,' she observed. 'You have to hold it up and these ladies don't. We'll shorten it to-morrow after school and put on a dress braid to save the wear.'

They had planned to have dinner at one of the little restaurants of which they had on Saturday observed many. Alas! to-day, they were closed, and the piles of bananas and oranges, the glass globes of shredded wheat biscuits, stared rebukingly back at them as though reminding them it was the Sabbath Day to be kept holy. Yesterday Letty and Prim had felt a part of the bustling tide of life; now they wandered about forlorn and homesick. Oddly enough, in all their quiet lives neither had known what it was to be bored and they could not give a name to this sensation. In desperation they went to the station, bought at an open booth a package of damp graham crackers and some bananas, food abhorrent to them both, and seated themselves drearily to pass the hour until train time.

Letty's heart was full of suspense. In all the excitement of the past twenty-four hours she had known an undercurrent of anxiety. She had thought to win Stephen's love by giving him a chance with his music. Had she instead helped to build a wall between them? Had this journey been simply a

wonderful, thrilling experience or had their spirits travelled farther apart on it than they could ever retrace?

While Primrose slept on the way home, Letty felt ill and wretched. She wondered as to the extent of Stephen's rage and was uncomfortably afraid he would not meet them at the station. Suppose no one came! She and Prim could never walk nine miles after all they'd done in the past two days.

Her anxiety was groundless. Stephen was there at the station and with him Tom Peebles, his hair a blazing beacon seen before the girls left the train. He was less lively than his coloring and his bearing owned his disappointment. He had come the night before to Beechwood direct from Boston and was now awaiting the up-train to take him to his father's house at the county seat. Though he had planned to surprise Prim, he could not help a feeling of grievance that she had not guessed his coming. The girl's evident disappointment did much to soften his own. She was kinder in that brief ten minutes while they walked arm in arm up and down the cinder path than he had known she could be.

As for Stephen, he had been in a fine fury the night before with Primrose for meanly planning to stay without him as he was convinced she had. With Letty it had not occurred to him to be angry and now that Prim had lost Tom's visit, his wrath was appeased and he drove them home in a glow of amiable virtue.

CHAPTER XI

DIANA AND ROGER

With perturbation Diana listened to her housemates' plans for the week-end. Both were to be away on Friday evening. She told herself that frankly she didn't dare have the wild man alone at the apartment. 'I might,' she reflected with amusement, 'call out from time to time to an imaginary chaperon. If he became violent, I could threaten to summon Mrs. Grundy. But if her appearance became absolutely necessary, I should be sorry I'd trusted to the lady.'

During the middle of the week her qualms proved groundless, for Roger suggested dining in town. He named as rendezvous 'Ye Olde English Coffee House,' at that time on Forty-Fourth Street, and was waiting there when Diana arrived in her new red suit with a bunch of small golden chrysanthemums at her breast. There was no music, but the food was excellent and Diana enjoyed her first taste of Yorkshire pudding. Trim waitresses in brown holland served them, and the girl, who had never crossed the Atlantic, took pleasure in fancying herself in London. Should she ever see London with Roger? The fancy smacked of Paradise.

In her former brief glimpses of him she had been eager to read his soul so that her glance had rested

lightly on the outer man and gone resolutely beyond. To-night a more leisurely survey left her pleased and reassured. He was as yet hardly in middle life, a restless, active man, who looked quick-tempered and equally quick-witted. His pointed reddish beard, his bronze-colored curling hair, his twinkling blue eyes with their extraordinary kindliness, did not make the *ensemble* of the villain. He might cause great unhappiness, but he would regret bitterly having done so. He might be dynamic, he might be cruel, but if he were it would follow on his impetuosity, never on deliberate malice.

'I am on my good behavior,' he assured her, his eyes sparkling. 'I repent me of the other evening.'

'Just as I thought!' she exclaimed. 'You feel that saying you're sorry wipes out your offence. I'm afraid you've not quite grown up.'

'Don't you like me the better for that, my dear?' he challenged.

She shook her head gravely. 'I think a man's actions should spring from thought, not precede it.'

'You, on the contrary, are rather too ancient — not, I assure you,' he hastily put in, 'in your appearance, but in the considered flow of wisdom contained in your remarks. No need to guess your profession. Your didactic utterances reveal the schoolmistress.'

Unused to ridicule and violently disliking it, Diana flushed with anger.

Seeing her discomposure, he went on gently: 'Yes,

my dear, you're right enough. I'm reckless and I act to repent. It's best you recognize that. Don't think, though, you can change me.'

'Why not?' she inquired bluntly.

'If you cherish such a theory, you reveal yourself as neither wise nor grown up. When I was truly young, I too expected to change, but I've learned wisdom. We go on as we begin. "As the twig is bent" — you know the rest.' He broke off with an air of sadness and resumed in a lighter tone: 'Now as to our evening. Shall we visit these critical friends of yours I must be so ambitious to please? Or may we put off that gloomy excursion and do a theatre on our own? Have you seen this young Nazimova?'

Diana hesitated. She wanted to get it over with Melissa before she cared too greatly. If he so much as flickered an eyelash in undue admiration, she wanted no more of him. But she couldn't bear to lose him just yet. Another evening might make all the difference in the world. Audibly she elected Hedda Gabler.

Nazimova was playing in the Bijou, a theatre tiny as its name suggested and packed nightly to its capacity. This little pantherlike actress had risen from the Ghetto and taken intellectual New York by storm. Then, too, she was playing the adored Ibsen whose problems seemed to that generation so vital. Diana was ashamed of her immense impressionability to the stage. She was so fiercely honest that at thirty she

would have resolutely laid aside her enthusiasm lest she deceive herself by her youthful emotion. She sat rigid, watching the stage with strained attention, determined not to miss a *nuance*. Just before the curtain fell when, after Hedda's suicide, the judge remarked significantly, 'People don't do these things,' Diana with half the audience began speculating eagerly as to his meaning. Was it said in stupid amazement? Was it an indictment of a world unconscious of its anti-social individuals? Was it a scientific pronouncement of the unfortunate Hedda's insanity? In Diana's ears, the phrase reverberated as a commentary on her own actions and Roger's. The lights of the theatre revealed her sitting bewildered. Roger looked at her with concern.

'People *don't* do these things,' she whispered with meaning. He understood all she conveyed. Oh, he was always quick to catch her thought. She granted him that.

'But you see people *do* do these things. Rest assured, Diana, whatever takes place in one soul could be comprehended with sympathy by a thousand others if only that poor soul could explain itself.'

They had come out near the carriage entrance where they were delayed by a brilliant throng awaiting their calls. With interest tinged with envy Diana remarked the bareheaded, elaborately gowned women. Disdain, petulance, boredom marred their faces, but Diana was childish enough to feel that were she

in their shoes she would be bound by none of these chains of the spirit.

'Diana!' she heard an interested voice exclaim, and, turning, she saw Melissa on Amory's arm, a calm, smiling Melissa in a splendid Manchu coat, looking as haughty and satiated as the best of them.

'It's only a pose with her,' thought Diana. 'Perhaps they're all making-believe.'

Melissa beckoned. 'Queen of Sheba,' thought Diana angrily. 'I'd make her come if it weren't for poor Amory's game leg.' Meanwhile she piloted Roger across to where the Vaughans stood. As for Melissa, the crowd, the noise, and jostling only made her the more unhurried. She extended her hand slowly and looked languorously into Roger's ardent eyes. Diana felt a little shiver run through her, and as if he had felt it Roger, released by Melissa, pulled her hand farther through his arm and patted it. If any one stared, he was oblivious. His hand felt warm through Diana's glove and sent a warmer glow to her heart, half ashamed as she was of his behavior.

'We'll take you to the ferry,' said Melissa in a voice reminiscent of a poppy field at noonday.

'How?' asked Diana bluntly.

'In our automobile,' her friend replied smoothly.

'Oh!' exclaimed Diana, thrilled in spite of herself. 'How very grand you have grown!'

'Every one has a motor,' Melissa remonstrated gently.

'On the contrary, I know no one else.'

Melissa shrugged a pretty shoulder.

'You mean every one in your class,' interpreted Diana, laughing. 'Now have you a car, Mr. Wentworth? Dare you confess if you haven't?'

'Once I had a caravan,' said Roger in happy reminiscence. 'There's many a millionaire who lacks a caravan.'

Amory leaped for the caravan as a falling airman for his parachute. If happiness could ever be overtaken would it not be in some such slow-moving vehicle? His ardent imagination saw himself progressing leisurely over sunlit roads, sketching endlessly, eating of salads and country fruits. He questioned Roger closely all the way to the ferry and not until he turned from his guests to Melissa did he realize how impossible such an adventure would be with her.

Almost before they were out of earshot, Diana asked eagerly, 'What do you think of her?'

So this was the friend whose approval was of prime importance. Was he to please her? Rather he was decidedly not to be pleased. Inwardly amused, he spoke: 'Melissa, you called her? Molasses and flies, flies and molasses! Nay, that's too gross for so pretty a woman. Flies and a honey-pot!'

'Our garbage man's name is Honey,' Diana ob-

jected. 'Honey Mague, our garbage man's name is.' She paused. 'Isn't she beautiful, though, really beautiful?' she urged.

'Very alluring. What a pitiful young chap the husband is! I like him already.'

'While you and Amory were talking so fervently about your precious caravan, Melissa asked if we would dine there on Friday.'

He agreed absently and, after a moment's silence, opened on the topic which had occupied his mind.

'Diana, I've something unpleasant to say.' They were almost alone on the ferry deck. Diana steeled herself. She knew she was to hear the secret to which he had alluded. 'When I was twenty-five, I married a girl of my own age. We lived together for two years and quarrelled three fourths of the time. Then she left me for an earlier lover. I divorced her and for ten years haven't heard a word about her. Still, it seemed to me simple justice to tell you of her. Common sense, too, for such a secret always leaks out in an unforeseen way.'

'I hate divorces!' exclaimed Diana angrily.

'She's likely dead,' he answered indifferently.

'How callous you are!' she retorted, her indignation rising.

'Yes!' He almost shouted the word. 'Yes! I thank whatever gods there be that she's lost all power to torment me! — yet she can still torture me

through you,' he added gloomily. 'That is, if you consent to be her agent.'

'It's not her leaving you — it's not what she did to you that's important, it's to what extent you were to blame that concerns us ——'

'She used to call me a mocking devil,' he answered bitterly. 'We girded at each other. We were two acids which ate each other.' A silence followed. He broke it with 'Oh, at first I was angry enough for murder. Then I felt relieved at being alone. I vaunted myself in my freedom. After that I became horribly lonely. All the time I was acutely ashamed because it's taboo among mankind to lose a wife. I felt as if every one pitied or despised me. By degrees, I grew remorseful and questioned my own conduct, and that led to my pitying her and feeling for her a queer tenderness she'd never inspired in me when she was my wife. At long last, these emotions have worn away just as a pebble is smoothed down by the waves. There's left a surface toughness which has kept me up to now from putting myself in a position to be hurt. Yes, to be quite honest, Diana, underneath, tenderness remains. Don't misunderstand me. It has nothing to do with love. It grows from my sense of being responsible. Besides, to me she's still only twenty-seven and I never lose sight of the fact that I'm forty.'

Diana patted his hand. 'I like you so much better for being a little fond of her, for confessing yourself a

little to blame. You must be difficult now to live with. I shudder to think of you fifteen years ago!'

The boat had docked and Diana took his arm as they walked over the gangplank giving it as she did so a little squeeze. When they were out of earshot, she continued, 'I won't take unfair advantage of what you've told me, but you'll admit it does give me a little the upper hand. You *must* behave soberly. You mustn't hurry me. I will have the rest of this school year free and not marry you before next autumn. Meanwhile, can't you find out about her? Whether she's alive or dead?'

'Why?' he objected. 'She's dead to us. I'm legally and morally free.'

'I should feel so much more an honest woman if I were certain the poor dear is dead,' sighed Diana. 'I hope I don't wish her dead. Better adultery than murder, I suppose.'

'Strong language for a schoolma'am!'

'Sometimes I think aloud,' she confessed.

After a pause, Roger said reluctantly, 'I'll take steps to find out about Audrey.'

'Audrey? What a pretty name! Audrey and Diana! Both pretty and fanciful. I suppose Audrey was pretty.'

'Very,' he answered sulkily. 'To tell you the truth, that night in the wood for one mad moment I thought you were Audrey, grown older, to be sure, and purified as if that sacrament of yours had washed

away — sins, I suppose you'd call them,' he ended lamely.

'I'd call them so if I thought them so. I mustn't harp on her, Roger, but if you loved me for being like her — only older, which isn't quite polite — you may quarrel with me, you may run again this gamut of unhappy emotions.'

'Never, never!' he exclaimed fiercely, and in the street illuminated by the red lanterns marking gaping holes, he put strong arms about her and kissed her violently. Diana trembled. Under his kisses, she lost the will power on which she prided herself and this frightened her.

'Please, Roger,' she begged. 'Not like that! Kiss me not like a lover, but as if we were old married people. Not the kind of old married people we shall be, but the kind every one else becomes!'

CHAPTER XII

DIANA MAKES TROUBLE

DIANA bought a new dress to wear to the Vaughans' little dinner. She was now less afraid of losing Roger to whom she felt bound by chains whose weight was precious to her. Still she hadn't quite liked his tone about her age. And what woman does not wish to appear lovelier than life to her lover? The new gown was a pale blue broadcloth with long satin sleeves, and a sheath skirt which followed accurately her lean, long figure. It was short in front and had a little train behind; Diana loved it fervently.

The evening began well, for Roger had no classes that afternoon and came after her, and lo! he wore a dress suit and a high hat and was magnificent beyond the wont of mortals. When she had put on the big blue hat which matched her gown and a long fawn-colored cloak, he told her she was a poem and looked good enough to eat. The mixed metaphor from him was more grateful to her than a sonnet from another.

'I'm on my good behavior again,' he volunteered. 'Before the evening is over, you'll implore me to relax my efforts lest the strain of virtue prove fatal.'

'To which of us?'

'To me, naturally. You could carry off any amount of goodness.'

His nonsense soothed her. She had never been so happy and confessed her bliss shyly. 'You are too beautiful to-night,' she assured him. 'I believe you are truly good. I feel the most inspiring confidence in you. I know you've guessed that I'm walking you into the lion's den.'

'Melissa?'

'She gobbles up any man she fancies.'

'Not now, surely? Not when she's a bride?'

'I don't know,' Diana confessed. 'I may be scandalizing, but Melissa can make a situation of any materials. Not that she flirts. She never does a thing she shouldn't. She simply sits tight and combs her hair with a golden comb.'

'And the shore about her is strewn with bleached bones?' he inquired.

Conscience smote. 'Here I am talking about her like a thief and a pickpocket on the very way to eat her dinner! The truth of the matter is we women are all jealous of Melissa. She's sweet and charming. She's gentle and restful and she'll listen to a man for hours on end! What man doesn't enjoy a sympathetic audience?'

No sooner were the greetings over than Amory broached the subject of the caravan. Would Roger sell it?

Alas! Roger had sold it and had seen it later minus its geraniums, its green paint decorated with the legend, 'J. J. Jones, the Genial Grocer. Eggs,

butter, and provisions.' There were doubtless other caravans ——

Amory shook his head. That had been the caravan of his dreams. If he couldn't have that, he wanted none.

Roger, bent on consolation, told him that the everlasting hills remained. And Amory did landscapes! In late August and September! That was the time. He should see the glowing foliage of the soft maple relieved by the sombre green of the infrequent pine. Everywhere there were splotches of burnt sienna. Oh, the golden glory of the beech in autumn! That yellow carpet under one's feet! And the woods were a hush of sweetness; the days were mellow, the nights had the tang of frost.

Diana, loving Roger more for his appreciation of her hills, impulsively suggested, 'Try it next fall, you two. Be guests of my people.'

'Never,' shuddered Melissa. 'Never on your desolate hilltop. I've heard too much about it in the years we've been friends.'

'A valley in a hilltop,' corrected Roger.

'A jewel in a casket,' murmured Amory.

To this honest Diana objected. It wasn't beautiful enough for that. Just a nice homey spot which satisfied her to the core.

'Perhaps,' said Melissa, more graciously, 'you could find us a cottage in the village. Amory could wander where he pleased with his easel. On pleasant

days I'd ask nothing better than your mountain fastness, dear Diana.'

'It would be so good for Stephen. He is having lessons and no one can manage his accompaniments. How delightful he would find it with you! It would not bore you either, for, believe me, my little brother has a voice!'

At that moment conscience pointed an accusing finger. If she had been afraid for Roger, what shouldn't she need fear for Stephen? Melissa would make mincemeat of him. Her enthusiasm waned, her speech halted, and Melissa, nosing a secret, advanced as Diana retreated.

'Yes, we must go next autumn; that is, if we don't decide on Europe.'

Amory spoke decidedly. 'We shan't go abroad on your terms, Melissa. It would be impossible.'

'What do you mean?' she asked coldly.

'I grant you we could travel on a boat, we could go through the motions of greetings and farewell, but as for the actual experience, we'd carry such a burdensome luggage of prejudices, we'd be so surrounded by people exactly like ourselves, we'd be so resolved on what impressions we ought to have, that we might better tarry comfortably at home.'

'Europe is an old story to Amory and a beloved one,' Melissa explained sweetly to Roger. 'He fears I'd spoil it for him. He objects to my point of view, as in truth he always does.'

Roger looked at her with sympathetic comprehension. There could be worse travelling companions than Melissa, he surmised, especially if one had Fortunatus' purse and was not too fastidious about the point of view. He liked Melissa; Amory he liked and respected.

On the way to the ferry he questioned Diana. 'Don't they live beyond their means?'

'Oh, no!' was Diana's shocked response. 'I know Amory's income. It seems like a grand duke's to me. And Melissa would never exceed an income. She could live in a walnut shell with a comfortable margin. What made you dream of such a thing?' she asked curiously.

'Because I'm hungry. It was such a *little* dinner,' he told her plaintively.

'It isn't penury. It's penuriousness. Amory never eats much. He wouldn't notice, but Melissa is "*near*." She always saved and now she has more, she'll save more.'

'Perhaps she learned economy in a hard school,' he suggested.

'Ye-es,' she hesitated. 'But, Roger, there's as much difference among the poor as the rich. It's the gesture that counts. Melissa is "near" with everything. She's the only person I ever knew who hoards a secret for the secret's sake. A thing that doesn't matter, a perfectly unimportant trifle, she'll tuck away and, when she's alone, take it out and gloat over it

and then put it back bright and shining in her mental cupboard. It gives her such a power over me. I'm putty in her hands and I regard her with unwilling admiration. Oh, I don't wonder that you men all dote upon her. So secret! So full of golden silences for you to speculate over! So perfect and so passionless!'

'Not that,' he corrected. 'Far from that last and perhaps that's the root of her dislike for Amory.'

She put her hands over his ears. 'We're two scandalous gossips, Roger. Don't you dare say another word. We've eaten their dinner and, even if you found it insufficient, it's base to discuss them so.'

'All right,' he agreed amiably, 'but I do like people enormously. I like to think about 'em and discuss 'em and chew their motives. It isn't such a bad idea, Diana, for the more you understand, the less you're shocked. However, my stomach craves food. I know a clean little place just a few steps away. Come along, Diana.'

It was, as he had said, a very clean little place. At one end of their porcelain-topped table was a great pile of paper napkins and at the other a glass dish heaped with golden cubes of butter. Diana made a plate doyley for each of them and smiled to think it was the first little domesticity she had practised for Roger. The solitary waiter, a lugubrious-looking young fellow more asleep than awake, brought them fried oysters. Roger gave Diana another illustration

of his interest in others. He began a conversation with the weary youth which, at least, had the effect of banishing slumber. He asked a good many questions, Diana thought, but his manner was so good-natured that people didn't seem to mind. After all folks did like to talk about themselves. This poor chap seemed positively grateful. From his interview, Roger at last turned to his cooling coffee with the air of having ticketed his man and placed him in his museum with a complete description attached. Diana reflected that, if she had been a little younger, she might have objected to this divided attention, but she felt it had its value. If Roger was supremely interested in the proletariat, wasn't she supremely interested in Roger? He might be learning about the waiter; wasn't she finding out a deal about him?

There was only one other patron in the place, a sailor whom Roger had characterized as 'three sheets in the wind.' The cashier was a buxom peroxide blonde; her hair extended over a wire cage which framed her head like a ghastly nimbus, her dirty nails polished to shell-like lustre. In paying the bill, Roger paused to chat and she welcomed him with 'wreathed smiles.' Meanwhile the sailor came lurching over to Diana and seated himself in the chair Roger had left vacant. He had not apparently observed her escort.

'All alone, girlie?' he inquired with praiseworthy cheerfulness.

Roger overheard and, to Diana's profound dis-

may, he charged across the intervening space, took a firm grip of the stout collar of the sailor's pea jacket, jerked him from his seat, knocking over as he did so three of the flimsy chairs, and shook him purposefully and grimly to and fro. Suddenly released, the sailor was too bewildered to find a footing and fell heavily, striking the back of his head on the tiled floor. The impact knocked him unconscious. In varying stages of alarm, the others gathered around, the waiter with muttered expletives, the cashier pulling her scattered locks over the horrid cage, Roger, to Diana's wrath, composedly settling his cuffs. Then he knelt down by the young fellow and looked him over carefully.

'Just a bit stunned,' was his verdict. 'We'll look after him. Fetch a cup of coffee, will you?'

In an instant more, the man came to, apparently rather uncertain as to what had happened. Roger, with the air of an offended parent, told him even while he held the coffee to his lips. Then he questioned him as to his destination, and on learning that, like themselves, the seafaring man was bound for Staten Island, he attached him grimly to their party and left him only when he had him across the ferry and on a street car in charge of a conductor engaged to put him off at the right corner.

Alone with Roger, Diana turned to him angrily. 'You wild man!' she exclaimed. 'You might have killed him! Why did you interfere? Do you suppose

I've lived in New York all these years without learning to take care of myself? Just as I feel so sure of you! Just when I think I've misjudged you and that you'll prove an ornament to your sex! Such an outbreak! Such a temper!'

Roger looked at her in amazement. 'My dear!' he exclaimed. 'The boy needed a lesson. Some other girl may not be so able to protect herself as you. He needed trouncing. He needed to be sent home. I'm sorry I couldn't go all the way with him. However, that conductor had a face on which to rely.'

'Oh, you might have left me,' she scolded, half crying. 'If the whole demonstration was to reform him, it's a pity you wasted any attention on me.'

'I'm sorry I've hurt you, Diana,' he answered gravely. 'But,' with rising cheerfulness, 'such an incident isn't likely to be repeated. Not having any family of my own, I naturally feel more responsible for outsiders. I do believe,' he ended diffidently, 'in the brotherhood of man.'

They were saying good-night in the vestibule. 'Please smile before you go in,' he coaxed.

She smiled half unwillingly. 'I like you so, Roger, and you may have your brotherhood of man if you'll allow me a growing sense of sisterhood with Audrey.' At that he looked so wretched that she kissed him voluntarily.

'And I'm impulsive myself,' she added. 'I shouldn't have "sicked" Melissa onto Stephen.'

'But isn't he just married? Wasn't it his wedding you celebrated that night I met you in the beech wood?'

'But Letty is a child. An ignorant child. Good as gold, pretty and sweet, but a stupid little creature. Melissa never minds making people miserable. I've the queerest feeling I've made trouble, Roger.'

'Oh, I shouldn't worry,' he replied easily. 'Don't think of them now. Just of you and me.'

CHAPTER XIII

HOME

PRIM christened the piano Normus, short for Enormous, in memory of the hectic time spent in placing the instrument in the sitting-room. Normus was by all odds the liveliest and best-loved piece of furniture the house had ever known. The reed organ was allowed to keep its state in the chilly parlor, but it was now a dead king in a mausoleum.

The sitting-room was the centre of the big farmhouse. Beyond was the parlor, and at either end doors opened into bedrooms, one belonging to the elder Boones and the other vacant since Grandma Haynes's death. A third door led out to the dining-room and a fourth shut off the narrow stair ascending to the upper chambers. It was a large room and sunny with three windows toward the east and a bay looking westward. Its walls were covered with an ancient brown paper depicting huntsmen leaping five barred gates, their hounds about them. The floor was entirely covered by a rag carpet which Grandma Haynes had woven. Even Diana was not to suspect its beauty for another five years. In a corner by the parlor door was a whatnot holding a kaleidoscope, the family photograph album, and a forbidding-looking china

cow which had come out of Wales with Grandpa Haynes. On the top shelf was a great pink-lined shell which had whispered to little inland ears of the great, the turbulent sea. In the centre of the room was a marble-topped table covered with a chenille cloth. On it were the family Bible, a pile of hymn books, and a large wicker work basket.

Of pictures there were few. Diana had banished Lincoln and his Cabinet, but there remained a steel engraving called 'Rock of Ages' in which a young girl clung desperately to the Cross. Over the dining-room door hung a walnut-framed motto worked in canvas, 'God Bless Our Home.'

Between the doors of stairway and mother's bedroom hung a magnificent painting depicting a Cavalier gentleman, reddish curls, pointed beard, blue eyes. It was suggestive of immense size and strength. This was a portrait of Geoffrey de Bohun and had been, with the family Bible, the only possession old Jaffrey had brought from the Blue Ridge. Here, indeed, the Cavalier looked singularly out of place, and as if sensible of that, a look of faint amusement hovered about his patrician features.

A golden-oak sofa had its ugly cheapness covered by a beautiful Paisley shawl. The chairs were of all sorts: a hideous patent rocker, a Morris chair, and a few Victorians were grouped about the table and in the sunny windows.

Over the western bay clambered an ivy and within

the embrasure stood an iron plant stand painted green, and bright with glowing fuchsias and scarlet geraniums. On the top shelf was a calla lily in great demand at funerals.

In winter the glory of the room was the great coal stove. Large as a furnace it could not be removed in summer, but then Mother Boone replaced the shining copper tea-kettle with flowers from her garden. Now that winter had settled in, the stove glowed with genial heat. The polished nickel gleamed; the bright bed of coals winked through the isinglass.

Normus changed the whole life of the house. Of old on winter evenings, the farmer and Uncle Lige had sat in the kitchen, their boots off, their soggy woollen hose drying before the open oven. Prim and her mother had sewed and mended in the sitting-room and Stephen had gone to the village or read or lounged about from one room to another. Now Uncle Lige kept his boots on and read in the sitting-room. Father Boone couldn't endure wearing his boots, but Letty tactfully proposed the sofa where stockinged feet suggested care of the furniture rather than laxity of manners. There he would lie and doze until the clock struck nine when he would start up suddenly and, in a voice thick with the dregs of sleep, exclaim, 'Time for prayers!' Devotions over, Letty and Prim would fetch apples, popcorn, or bring in doughnuts and cheese from the buttery. After that, the old people retreated, yawning, to bed, nor were the young

fry slow in following, weary as they were and drunk with the wine of the hills.

Halcyon days for Letty! She alone knew to the full the beauty of that sitting-room. Love turned its oddities to harmony. There no cruel word was spoken. Goodness and simplicity dwelt there.

She was now sure that she was to have a baby and waited only for a dramatic moment to announce her hope. Over and over she read the Magnificat and the story of Elizabeth, sympathizing exultantly with the proud boasting of those Jewish women. It troubled her to think that Stephen might not be pleased. What if he should regard it as another chain to bind him?

At Christmas, Grace and her family and Diana came to Beechwood. The farmhouse teemed with life; every one worked hard and happily, and Mother Boone's round face was one expansive smile. On Christmas Day, Letty was just lifting out the great turkey to turn it over when Grace stopped her with 'Letty, don't! You shouldn't lift that great creature, a little mite like you!'

Primrose, Diana, and the mother were there. Letty thought her moment had arrived. She straightened up and faced them, smiling crookedly, her brown eyes swimming. 'No, I don't suppose I had ought to,' she said soberly.

For a moment they all stared, then —

'Oh, Letty!' cried Primrose, and

'Oh, Letty!' echoed Grace.

'Little lamb,' exclaimed Mother Boone and folded Letty to her capacious bosom.

Diana said nothing for a moment, and then asked curiously, 'Is Stephen pleased, Letty?'

Letty gently disengaged herself. 'He doesn't know,' she confessed. 'I wish mother would tell him.'

Prim snorted. 'I'm not married, but I know enough to know that's not etiquette. You do your own telling, you little gump. You should say, "Dear, there is a little ship coming to us." Perhaps so far from the water it would be better to say, "There's a democrat drawn by an old white horse acoming over the hill. Inside is a little one for us."'

Letty began to cry. Diana talked rapidly about the turkey. She plunged a fork into it and a column of steam rose with a delicious odor. Then she said to Letty in a matter-of-fact voice, 'As soon as I get back to New York, I'll send you some English long-cloth and some baby laces. I can get such darling things there.'

Letty wiped her tears. 'Thank you,' she said in a subdued voice. She remembered she had said 'had ought,' before Diana. She hoped the slip had gone unnoticed.

During the holidays, the family on the hill shared the festivities of the little village which nestled in the valley. On the holy Eve there was a community Christmas tree; candles had been lit in every window for the guidance of the Infant. There were waits, too,

the male quartet who trudged the snowy streets and stopped before homes of the sick and aged to sing them old Welsh carols.

Christmas over, there was a church supper and social up at the Boone farm. Stephen drove down after a load with the big black horses and the hay wagon on runners. The night was keen and frosty, the snow drifted deep on either hand. With wintry brilliance, the cold stars lighted the long, steep hillside.

The Boones had spent a busy day in preparation. Each guest chose what to furnish and one never knew whether a supper would be all chocolate cake or all salmon salad. Diana had unwillingly baked a five-quart pan of light-colored New York State beans and two loaves of quick brown bread. With better grace, Prim had made two huge pumpkin pies; the mother had boiled a ham and baked salt-rising bread, while Letty's deft brown fingers had reared a mighty frosted cake iced in Christmas colors.

Before five o'clock people began to arrive, each woman with her babies — her offering to the supper in a large tin steamer over the ownership of which there would later be much discussion. The committee received the viands and a half-dozen gawky little girls helped wait on table. The choice foods held on very well until the family, the committee, and the little girls were ready to eat at the third table. Then Abbie Gunn's string-bean pickles and Mary Hughes's

cocoanut cake with a frosting which had run promised scanty fare. Stephen groaned, but Mother Boone opened home-canned raspberries and a tin of salmon and Primrose produced baked beans and raised biscuits which she had filched and hidden earlier in the evening.

Just as they sat down, a mighty knock sounded at the back door. Stephen rose to answer, grumbling that whoever it was ought to have sense enough to walk in. He came back smiling and announced, 'There's a package out there for you, Prim. Better fetch it in.' All curiosity, Primrose ran out to the kitchen and there stood Tom Peebles, one vast grin! Primrose threw both arms about his neck and hugged him with enthusiasm, surprising him as much as he had her.

After supper there was a program. Stephen had refused to perform, as he had no 'pieces,' but Diana sang, 'Forgotten You' and 'Absence.' After that two little girls played a 'Galop for 4 hands.' One of the performers tittered nervously and broke down in the middle. 'Start in all over again,' suggested Stephen in a stage whisper, which the young persons did to the distress of the audience.

A fifteen-year-old girl recited in a hollow voice a poem commencing, 'Mine is a strange, wild story, The strangest you ever heard.' Her listeners could but agree. Certainly no one there had experienced anything half so out of the ordinary.

The program was drawn out to an unmerciful extent and when it concluded, the young people fled with relief to the bedroom which had been Grandma Haynes's. There they played kissing games, 'Post Office,' 'Clap in and clap out,' all joining from tiny tots to Primrose and Tom.

At the last gathering in Beechwood, Letty had been a bride. To-night another bride was present, but where Letty had bloomed with the first glory of womanhood, this was a gentle, wrinkled, little old soul clad in a stiff black satin. From a ribbon about her wrist dangled a small black silk bag filled with hard peppermint lozengers, one of which she sucked continually. She had come from the county seat, Tom Peebles's town, as the third wife of Deacon Millis, a good but miserly old man who had felt quite alone in the world since the death of his 'last pardner and helpmeet,' as he always spoke of the second Mrs. Millis.

Instead of joining the knot of ancients busy settling the affairs of the nation, he sat faithfully beside his bride, on the golden-oak sofa, where in their black garments they looked uncommonly like two aged crows. Conscious of being the topic of conversation in most groups, the little old lady humped over — making herself as insignificant as possible; but the deacon thrust out his meagre chest and peered about with his twinkling black eyes while his fringe of white beard wagged defiance to the curious.

'I feel for his new pardner,' Uncle Lige admitted to the coterie of old cronies in a far corner. 'A nearer man than Deacon Millis ne'er trod this terrestrial sphere. 'Tis a providence she has money of her own. I was informed by Ellen Walsh, she that was kin to the deacon's first wife, she that was Matildy Walsh, that number three is a woman of substance with a bank account.'

'Let's hope she keeps her clutches on it,' remarked Salathiel Clapp.

'The deacon is honest,' rejoined Lige. 'In fact, if so be that it were in his hands, he could not endure to see one jot or one tittle of it to be scattered abroad. With him it would be safer than with her. I make no doubt of that.'

Frank Paul, the carriage maker, laughed slyly. 'Yesterday the new Mis' Millis done a dretful careless, 'stravagant deed. Broke the head off her darning needle, by Jocks!' He slapped his knee and laughed heartily to the annoyance of his hearers.

'Wal, how'd you come to know of such a trifling sarcumstance?' asked Salathiel impatiently. 'Quit your laughin' and tell us what more there be to it.'

'"The laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot,"' Uncle Lige quoted gloomily.

'Waal, then, blest if old Deek didn't fetch that air needle down to the shop and ast me could I drill in a new eye for him? "Sartin sure," I says, and do so

I did as neat a job as ever I see if I do say so as shouldn't.'

'More fool you to obleege the stingy old hunks,' objected Salathiel testily.

'Lissen here now,' said Frank, leaning forward to tap Salathiel impressively on the knee. 'Lissen, ye can buy a whole paper of darning needles for ten cents, can't ye?'

'I reckon.'

'Waal, so be it. Those be good darning needles, maybe, but when I had got through with the deacon's 'twas an extra-speshul-custom-built darning needle, and I figured out two bits weren't none too much for my time, labor, and skill.'

'I swan!' ejaculated Salathiel. 'Did the old skinflint pay ye?'

'An honest man he is, as Lige calls him, and he paid according, though not, I'm bound to say, without murmuring and disputing.'

'By Jocks,' exclaimed Salathiel solemnly regarding High Finance in the person of Frank Paul, Carriage Maker.

Letty, pausing a moment in her busy care for others, heard from above a thin little wail. Her room had been used for the guests' wraps and she remembered that Mrs. Meleny's baby had been laid crosswise on her bed. Running upstairs, she found him indignantly struggling beneath a heavy cloak dropped by some careless youngster. She picked him up,

patted him, straightened his woppsed-up clothing and sat down holding him in the little rocker. She began to be very happy. She made believe he was her baby safe at last in port. She sat there contentedly rocking and crooning a tuneless little lullaby until he fell asleep.

Presently Primrose burst into the room and closed the door behind her. 'It's Angie Potts,' she explained to Letty. 'She's selling tracts — not giving them away, mind you! She wants me to buy, "From the ball-room to hell!" The old gump! As if I'd ever seen a ball-room. Golly, how I'd like to!' Cautiously she opened the door. 'She's tackling Martin now and he's giving her Jeremiah! Listen, Letty!'

They could hear Grace's Martin exclaiming firmly in his best pulpit tones, 'No! No, no, my dear sister. Such a paper is mischievous in itself. Too often it proves an instrument of the Devil instead of a weapon against him.'

Primrose giggled joyously as she heard Miss Angie Potts's indignant answer. 'What fun for Martin to be able to speak his mind! I dare say he has to do considerable hedging among his own congregation. What on earth are you doing, Letty? Oh, the sweet lamb!' She came over and looked smilingly down at Letty's lapful, then turned and ran away to find Tom, who was hunting her.

Before long, Letty had a second visitor. This time it was Stephen after a clean handkerchief for 'Blind-

man's Buff.' 'What are you off here alone for?' he asked curiously. Then, coming nearer and perceiving her sweet burden, 'Why doesn't the kid's mother take care of him?'

'I love to,' said Letty happily. 'Come closer, Stephen. Isn't he dear?' She looked coaxingly up at him and Stephen's exquisite perception read her meaning.

'Gosh!' he exclaimed feebly. Realizing that was not enough he added gloomily, with more truth than delicacy, 'One thing leads to another.'

'Then you're not pleased? You're not grateful?' demanded Letty, holding to her breast the sharp edge of the sword.

'Hell, no!' he exclaimed furiously. Instantly repentant, he added in a hushed voice, 'I was too young to be a husband, Letty. I'm too young to be a father.'

'What about me?' Letty asked dully.

'I know,' he agreed miserably. 'Tough luck for both of us.'

'Not for me, Stephen Boone,' she flung at him passionately. 'Not tough on me! Not if I die for it!'

He had never seen Letty flare up so. He felt ashamed of his selfishness and leaned over stroking her soft hair. 'Please forgive me, Letty,' he coaxed.

She nodded. 'Go away, Stephen,' she urged. She was afraid she was going to cry again.

CHAPTER XIV

LETTY'S BABY

All Letty's ecstatic visions of motherhood were needed to help her through the wearisome months that followed. For some time she felt too ill to want to leave home, and when that phase passed, her condition had become apparent. Left to herself, Letty would have felt no false shame, but Mother Boone was as inconsistent as most women of her day. Maternity was an honorable condition, but its detection amounted to disgrace. A woman of refinement did not visit or even attend church during such a period. The more refined one was, the less one revealed the condition. Docile Letty gave up choir rehearsals, church socials and services. She couldn't keep out of Stephen's sight, but felt that her appearance shocked him, and was confirmed in this sad decision by the neglect with which he treated her. He was always busy with farmwork or music. She had indulged in a glorious dream of playing Normus while he sang, but alas! her little brown hands, so deft in cookery, blundered sadly on the keys. She was at once pained and relieved by Stephen's telling his mother he would go back to his old room while Letty felt so poorly. She grew terribly depressed and vague fears obsessed her. She trembled at death and

the abandonment of her darling to Stephen. Mother Boone took out of her hands the household tasks which were so congenial and though she sewed on tiny garments she had much time for reverie. She had always thought reading would be great fun if one had leisure for it, but now she could not seem to fix her mind on what she read.

Father Boone, conscious in his abysmal silence of Letty's flushed face and cavernous eyes, suggested a panacea.

'Checkers?'

Lumbering where all her motions had been grace, Letty went after the board and the men; after that, while Stephen of an evening practised his interminable exercises, the old man and the young girl played game after game in complete silence.

In March, Stephen suggested having the choir up to sugar-off. He looked very jolly while he made the proposal. He was thinking of the straw ride, of the flickering lights of the shanty in the sugar bush, of bringing in pans of snow from the heaped-up hollows in the woods, of the pickles, and eggs boiled hard in the sap. Last year he had eaten a dozen on a wager.

Mother Boone shook her head.

'You forget Letty,' she said.

'What about Letty?' he asked irritably. 'I should think she might enjoy a little fun once in a while. If she doesn't want to come to the sugar bush, let her go to bed.'

With heavy dignity Letty rose and toiled upstairs. It seemed to her as if she were always running away to hide her tears.

Mother Boone looked sternly at her son over her gold-bowed spectacles. 'Sit down, Stephen,' she said firmly, pointing to the chair Letty had vacated.

Unwillingly he obeyed.

'Now you, Stevie, you sit quiet and listen to me,' she went on. Then ensued a long pause during which Stephen shuffled his feet uneasily.

'When you married Letty, you acted of your own free will and accord, didn't you?'

'Yes,' he growled.

'Half of it was because you were sorry for Letty and because her mean old hunks of a stepfather told you she'd been talked about, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' he muttered.

'All well and good so far. Maybe it was rash, but it was acting kind and like a Christian. But, Stevie, that ain't half the story.' She paused and then went on inexorably: 'The more I think about it the more I've come to the firm conclusion that the other reason you had for getting married was just pure temper. You were mad clear through at Letty and her stepfather, and your family and yourself, the whole kit and caboodle. And when you married Letty, because you were in an angry passion, you done a pretty low-down trick. As far as I can see, 'twa'n't none of it Letty's fault. She ain't to blame now because she's

going to have a baby. But you keep right on being mad and unforgiving and working your spite off on Letty. I'll allow you'd a right to be mad at old John Huddis and a right to be mad at yourself, but I don't see why you should take it all out on Letty.'

Stephen had never heard his mother make so long a speech. The stern justice of her rebuke precluded argument. Indeed, he ventured no remonstance, but when she had finished, he walked noisily upstairs, slamming the door behind him.

Alone, his mother nodded vigorously. 'That'll do Mr. Stevie a mort of good,' she murmured complacently.

Stephen went into his old room and sat down on the edge of his bed. Through his mortification intruded the little swollen face of Letty; her ungainliness which had disgusted him now seemed pathetic. He hadn't meant to take out his spite on Letty, but without reflection had vented his anger at what crouched to receive it. He had ignored Max; he had neglected Letty. Indeed he had been very unhappy this long time. His heart was sore, his world was awry. He hated his marriage, he was outraged at the prospect of parenthood. As long as he remained at home, his music could bring him scant pleasure. He kicked a chair angrily as he remembered the free criticism of Mr. Nate Dabney after last morning service.

'Well, Steve, I can't say as I think pulverizing is

improving your voice none. Caterwauling is what I call that selection you give us this morning.'

Even the minister, reaching up to pat his shoulder affectionately, 'Stephen, there's nobody can sing the "Ninety and Nine" as you do. We aren't educated up to oratorio music here.'

Indeed, they weren't, thought the boy bitterly. What's more they didn't want to be. Improvement was a word to conjure with the wrong way. Any one who knew anything was 'stuck up.' Letty wasn't certainly to blame for that. She liked his singing. She'd listen to him by the hour. Just once she had asked him not to sing and that was when he had been practising 'I know that my Redeemer liveth.' He had been thundering it forth, that triumphal pæan, glorying in the broad assurance, 'And though worms destroy this body, Yet in my flesh shall I see God.' Oh, ho! That was it! Letty was afraid, poor Letty was afraid of dying. Oh, that wretched baby, to make all this disturbance!

Impetuously he rose and went down the hall to Letty's room. His mother in her rocking-chair in the sitting-room heard his steps and again nodded complacently. He knocked, an unaccustomed refinement. Letty called softly, 'Come in.'

She sat in the cozy little rocker embroidering. She smiled at him uncertainly and put out a hand. He took it, bent, and kissed her.

'Letty,' he said, 'why didn't you like me to sing, "I know that my Redeemer liveth"?'

'Oh, Stephen,' she answered in a troubled voice, 'it's so dreadful. I do so hate to think of worms destroying this body!'

He comforted her with large assurances. A perfectly natural affair; every one living had been born that way; no one died nowadays when a baby came. She listened, smiling vaguely and in silence.

That night he asked his mother if Letty oughtn't to have the doctor.

'Why, I don't know but it would be a good thing,' she agreed. 'One of these days I'll ask him to come up this way.'

Stephen forgot the matter in a day or two and Mother Boone put it off from one week to another. She had had five children without bothering the doctor before her time and it didn't occur to her to be anxious over Letty.

The last of July brought Diana back to Beechwood. She had spent the month in an Adirondack camp with Amory and Melissa. Roger had been with them a week and in some ways the time had been enchanted. However, she had seen little of Roger alone, for Amory spent most of his time away sketching and Melissa was rather on her hands. Though disappointed, she knew it was for the best. She did not intend to marry Roger until the Christmas holidays but, as time went on, she found him harder to manage. He was impatient of a delay which seemed to him absurdly unnecessary. Deeply in love as she

was, some obscure prompting made her hold out. It seemed as if she must be assured of Audrey's fate before she took her place. And she did so hate to tell her mother she was marrying a divorced man, with a wife goodness knew where.

Arrived at Beechwood, Diana was frightened at Letty's appearance. Naturally Stephen and Primrose wouldn't suspect anything wrong, but her mother should have known. She said so to her at the first opportunity, adding: 'Letty looks ghastly. I never saw such a flush. And her hands and feet are frightfully swollen. For pity's sake, send for the doctor.'

Mother Boone, conscience-smitten and relying on Diana's common sense, sent Stephen post for the doctor. He arrived full of easy jocularity, but quickly sobered. He suggested Letty's going to the hospital, but there was none nearer than Buffalo and Letty trembled so at the very mention of being sent away from home that the idea was abandoned.

From that time she was so cosseted and lapped about with observances that she told Diana she felt like a princess. She had dreaded Diana's questioning eyes and candid tongue, but now found the older girl gentleness itself and the two struck up a friendship. To Letty, Diana was wit and beauty personified. As to her clothing, she believed it the acme of elegance. She admired, without envy, Diana's sparkling solitaire. Primrose and Diana spent the first day of August in making her a pretty negligée of green

crêpe, and Letty wore it that evening as she lay on the couch upon the crimson Paisley, her dark hair lying beside her in two ropes, her heart-shaped face, feverishly flushed, below the dusky brilliance of her eyes.

Before morning her trouble came upon her.

The hay crop was late that year, and afterward Letty reproached herself for putting them all out so. Primrose was left to cope with the house work; the nurse came too late, and meanwhile Diana, cooler than her mother, waited on the old doctor and Tom who by great good luck was on a visit.

After a long period of unconsciousness, Letty found herself lying in her bed trying to fix her eyes upon the clock on the bureau. Its face reeled and went from her. It came again and went. She wanted to see her baby, but her tongue wouldn't ask. Immense lassitude engulfed her. A woman in a nurse's uniform bent over her. With a great effort Letty made her lips form the word, 'Baby?'

Smiling the nurse shook her head as to a child one doesn't wish to answer. 'Go to sleep, dear,' she said soothingly.

'Baby?' asked Letty, this time audibly. Her eyes were very frightened in her small white face.

Diana took the nurse's place. She knelt by the bed and clasped Letty's weak, relaxed hand. 'Dear Letty, darling Letty,' she said, 'your little baby is dead.'

'Dead?' Letty asked faintly.

Diana nodded, tears running down her face.

'A boy?'

She nodded again.

'I want to see him.'

Diana shook her head and Letty drifted into unconsciousness.

The next day she saw Stephen. He was crying. 'I'm sorry, Letty,' he said. She reached out a hand and laid it on his curls.

'Stephen,' she said, 'won't you let me see my little boy?'

'No, Letty,' said Stephen shuddering. Letty couldn't forget that Stephen had shuddered when she had wanted to see her little baby.

CHAPTER XV

AMORY AND MELISSA COME TO BEECHWOOD

The first thing that Letty did after she was up and about was to make one of her famous four-decker chocolate layer cakes for Diana's friends, the Vaughans.

Those poor Vaughans who even in their honeymoon had been dissatisfied with each other! A year had now elapsed since their marriage and during that time a quarrel had never taken place. Better for them had there been a dozen. Amory observed, judged, and kept silence. Melissa's niggardliness disgusted, her vanity outraged him. To him, her petty deceits argued a complete lack of honor. He found her setting false values, and believed her entire scale out of tune. He never criticised audibly, but his cold blue eyes looked on her with hostility. A lifted eyebrow, an occasional wince, bore unimpeachable witness to his distaste.

As for Melissa, she was no fool. She knew his standards were different from her own. She would have been willing to adopt many of them, but she was bewildered by her new life and by his bitter silence. She felt like a specimen squirming under the scalpel. Nothing was so necessary to her as apprecia-

tion. Without praise she was like a thirsty lily. Her most genuine desire hitherto had been to be approved, but if Amory ever said, 'You are exquisite, Melissa,' or, 'Melissa, you are simply priceless,' his ironical tone gave it the turn of an accusation. She had fallen at length into a discontent so deep as to become a thorough unhappiness, the more so because she saw no prospect of an end to her misery. Frail as he was, Amory would probably live forever — delicate people were sure to, they took such care of themselves. As for divorce she never seriously regarded it. Divorces were difficult affairs, out of the question for Melissa. Her most remarkable quality was not her vanity, it was her superb conventionality. Besides, she had no desire to be poor again, to be once more earning her living.

Often it seemed to her that a violent quarrel would clear the murky atmosphere. Once she made up her mind to provoke one deliberately, but her moment was ill chosen. Amory ventured a caress and she repulsed him angrily. He never repeated the tenderness.

The unfortunate pair arrived in the little village at the end of August, a week before the time when Diana must return to her school work. She had been at great pains to prepare for her friends and Fate in removing Grandma Todd had obligingly played into her hands. Diana had asked her married daughter to rent the house furnished for an indefinite period

and the young woman had easily agreed. Questioned as to her terms, 'Five dollars to a Baptist and ten to a Methodist,' had been her crisp response. With unusual tact Diana suppressed Amory's Episcopalianism by saying her friends would probably attend the Baptist Church and would not stick at paying fifteen dollars a month.

Lanny Todd saw to it that the house was neat as a new pin, and the afternoon of their arrival Stephen drove Diana down to inspect and fill the larder with half a boiled ham, doughnuts, baked beans, and Letty's supreme offering. Remembering Amory's likes, Diana had Stephen build a fire in the coal range. Then like good Brownies, they disappeared.

Arriving listless and sad in the rattling stage, Amory and Melissa were heartened to see a light in the little house where the driver left them. The door was locked, but the key hung conveniently beside it.

Amory laughed. 'Evidently they lock the doors simply to show they can,' he remarked.

'Oh, what a quaint little place!' exclaimed Melissa entering before him.

Out of a boxlike hall she stepped into a small, square parlor. Behind that was the sitting-room similar in size and shape, and at the rear was the kitchen, where stood the dining-room table. One bedroom opened from the sitting-room and there were two more upstairs with slant roofs and small paned windows. It was the oldest house of the vil-

lage, unpainted and rather rickety, but bearing the impress of the defunct Mrs. Todd, who had been a notable housekeeper.

The parlor had an ingrain carpet and horsehair-covered furniture ranged at exact, solemn intervals, but the sitting-room was better fitted to be the abode of frail humanity. It had a rag carpet and there were fuchsias and cacti in the windows and on the mantel a jolly old clock with a snow scene painted below the dial. On a bamboo easel was a chromo of a dreadful little boy in kilts. Amory, whistling, promptly turned him to the wall and hung Melissa's cloak over the whole. It was not so easy to dispose of another attempt at decoration. A row of portraits of the pastors of the Baptist Church faced on the opposite wall a line of silver coffin plates. Amory discovered with vague relief that the coffin plates had to do with the Todds, not the ministers. Still, he remarked gloomily, that meant more corpses. Without a word Melissa took them all down and laid them in a dresser drawer. After that they inspected the kitchen. They warmed themselves at the stove, a miracle of black satin. They washed at the iron sink and then sat down to do homage to the Boone food. There was a note from Diana asking them to come up for supper on the following day. Lanny Todd's husband would bring them, Jules Jenks, his name was, and he lived at the second house below the post office.

There was a second screed. On Letty's cake lay

a slip of paper which said simply, 'With Letty's love.'

'I forget who Letty is,' observed Amory, 'but I think well of her. She's a good, she's a noble woman to judge her by her works.'

'Diana's sister-in-law,' Melissa returned. 'This Stephen, a mere boy, married another infant a year ago. She has just lost a baby. It seems she can't have another and is quite heartbroken.'

Amory's face clouded.

Before he fell asleep on his feather bed, he had fallen deliciously in love with the village. His last thought was that he had earned repose. If ever a man had worked hard to open a window, that man was he. It had been nailed down all the way around. He felt a glow akin to the discoverer's. In a hundred years no hand had opened that window. Of that he was convinced.

Melissa had been assured by Diana that, to have a hired girl, she must become an invalid. Folks would see a sick woman didn't suffer, but healthy people didn't deserve help. Besides, such a person must be one of the family, share the meals, and enjoy parlor privileges for her beau. Melissa, too sleek and golden to play the invalid, and perfectly determined not to be the complete housewife, had through Diana secured the services of a strapping young girl who would come in a few hours daily to wash dishes and 'bake up.'

In the morning the Vaughans sauntered out to view the town, the post office, the two stores, the three churches, and the cemetery. Most of the houses were white, the barns red. The front lawns were seldom more than three feet deep, but at the side and behind the dwellings they were spacious and well-cared-for. They were hodgepodge houses which had started out simple frame buildings like Grandma Todd's, but in prosperity had thrown out porches in unexpected places and here and there a large window, never quite plumb. Amory found the air sweet and heady, the atmosphere peaceful, but the architecture vastly inferior to that of a New England village. However, it was not for him to cavil. He didn't paint villages, and people had not been tempted to improve the hills.

Their circuit of the town completed, they paused at the home of Jules Jenks and were assured by his Lanny, still Lanny Todd after ten years of Jenksdom, that her husband would be at the post office at five to take them up the hill.

'Why couldn't he come to our place next door?' Amory marvelled when they had left Mrs. Jenks.

'Too proud, I dare say,' said Melissa indifferently. 'These people like to show their independence.'

The day moved on more pleasantly than usual with the Vaughans. At noon their trunks arrived. Lightheartedly whistling, Amory helped unpack; Melissa shook out, pressed, hung away her pretty clothes.

She had not been rich long enough to lose any of the pride of possession. Her nature would never permit her to lose much.

Meanwhile Amory was thinking that this simple life might bring out the best in Melissa, make her more honest, more candid. What if the blue flower grew here and they should be given wisdom to gather it?

At five they walked the few steps to the post office where Jules Jenks waited in a dilapidated surrey drawn by a dejected brown horse.

'This ain't a very stylish rig,' he explained, 'but I hired out my team for road work.'

'We don't care about style,' Amory returned doubtfully, 'but what troubles me, Is she safe?'

Jules stared. 'Safe? You mean will she run away?'

'Oh, no, no,' Amory civilly returned. 'But she looks so insecure — in short, isn't she likely to die on our hands?'

'Waal, if she ain't died for thirty-two years, it looks like she ain't got the habit of dying,' Jules replied dryly. 'Climb in. We got quite a piece to go.'

Sophie May, for such was the beast's euphonious name, started off briskly enough on three legs, clattering down the village street. Far ahead past curves of dusty road, Amory could see the steep rise of the Boone hill. He wondered if Sophie May could make it. He had visions of her settling down between the shafts, the disreputable harness breaking, and her

passengers sliding back to town at a terrific rate of speed. With Jules's fate, he was not concerned. 'Let the skipper go down with his ship,' he muttered, to Melissa's bewilderment.

Sophie May knew how to take care of herself. When she felt the need of rest, she stopped stock still, turning her head toward them with a bland expression, as if courteously to explain her action. The slow progress was not unregarded. Amory was too intent on Sophie May to observe the faces behind discreetly disposed curtains, but he kept an attentive ear on Jules, who was rambling on about a man he had seen injured at a county fair. 'He had a bad arm. A very bad arm. I don't know but it might have been the death of him. 'Tis likely I read his death in the paper.' He sighed heavily and waited while Sophie May took a vacation. 'Whether I saw it in the paper or not, I couldn't state, posi-*tive*-ly, as I didn't know the man's name.'

Amory started at such a depth of interest in a man with whom Jules was so perfectly unacquainted.

Jules obligingly pointed out the principal residences and landmarks. Down by the second bridge a herd of cows stepped through the cool water, the setting sun in their mild eyes. A row of great willows edged the creek in a long line as perfect in interval and symmetry as if a landscape gardener had placed them. Beyond on the side of the creek toward the

hill was a dark mass, a grove of hemlock used, Jules said, for town picnics.

They had passed the last dwelling before the turn, the little white house of Letty's stepfather standing in front of the big red barn, like a timid child pushed forward by its mother. Far to their right the setting sun shone fiery red upon the face of Jordan's big barn, the largest in the county.

'Big enough for Ham, Shem, and Japhet,' murmured Amory.

The hill road was as usual deserted. Cattle came close to the bars. One colt flung up his heels and fled to the far end of his pasture. Dusty wild asters and black-eyed Susans came boldly up to look at them. By the great maple, halfway up, Sophie May stopped with finality.

Jules looked back at his passengers. 'She wants you should get out,' he remarked briefly.

'Oh, by all means. Don't let me disoblige a lady,' Amory agreed with alacrity. 'How about you, Melissa?'

'If she's temperamental, she must be humored,' she agreed indifferently, and alighted.

Jules sat still. Presently Sophie May went on with him. Amory and Melissa looked at each other, laughing.

'How much farther is it?' Amory called out.

''Bout a mile and a half,' Jules answered.

'Let's walk, Melissa. We'll save so much time.

You can indulge in your pet sport of saving,' he added, in a lower tone.

She failed to hear the last and agreed. 'Pay Mr. Jenks and let him go back,' she suggested.

But Jules objected. 'I contracted to take ye and I be going to take ye. No room to turn around here. If the lady kin drive, I'll get out.'

'Sophie May doesn't need a driver,' said Melissa. 'Perhaps if you walk, too, Mr. Jenks, she'll be fresher for the rest of the way.'

Jules refused to dismount. 'Ye kin get in ag'in by that clump of shumack,' he said, pointing with his whip.

'He may as well earn part of his money,' Melissa said softly. 'Walk on, if you like, and assure them of my eventual arrival.'

Diana was stringing beans on the back stoop when Amory walked into the yard. Seeing him approach, limping wearily but holding his head gallantly erect, she felt a deeper kindness for him than ever in the days he had come half courting her. She ran down the steps to greet him and gave him a sisterly kiss, while she questioned eagerly.

'Where's Melissa? Not sick, I hope?'

'Your postillion approaches,' he answered, waving a hand in the direction from which he had come. 'She may arrive with him in time for breakfast, but I hastened on not to miss the evening meal. Your air had already given me a desperate hunger.'

'Hasn't Jules his team?' Diana asked sharply.

'No team. One old derelict yclept Sophie May.'

'The villain!' she exclaimed. 'And he'll charge you just as much! I'm cross with him, but I shan't dare tell him so. Here one doesn't tax a sinner with his sins. We just talk about him until our opinion gets back to the culprit with all the added weight of our neighbors' exaggerations.' She paused as Stephen followed by old Jaffrey came to them from the barn. Amory looked like a little boy beside them. With his bright pale face cocked up at them admiringly, he shook hands with an evident desire for friendship.

Now appeared the chariot of Jules bearing the lovely Melissa! 'How absurd any one else would appear!' murmured Diana. Bony old Sophie May, broken harness, wretched surrey, bent, slouching driver!

Stephen would have helped her out, but Amory was before him. That gave Stephen time for a good look. Melissa wore a summer hat, a great floppy corn-colored affair crowned with blue hydrangea blossoms. She wore no cloak and her dress was of flowered organdie with a ruffled fichu crossing over her beautifully modelled bosom. She herself was radiant, calmly smiling, her eyes the swimming delicious blue of the September heaven. When she moved toward the house, one of Stephen's few remembered lines of Vergil flashed into his mind, 'And by her gait, the

goddess was revealed.' All the starved heart of the youth, all the unsatisfied cravings of the potential artist within him beheld in this lightning glance the possibility of satisfaction. All this year he hadn't known a moment's peace. That was what she was, peace, content. She could assuage his longing. In her eyes he read such a promise.

Letty was at the door. She looked fragile, etherealized by her illness. She wore a pretty tea gown of the color called ashes of roses. It seemed lazy to Letty to lie about so much and sinful extravagance to be tricked out in these fragile garments, but Primrose and Diana would have it so.

Shyly, she extended her hand to Amory, but put up her cheek for Melissa to kiss. She had known so much petting of late from the womenfolk at Beechwood, that she had herself become demonstrative. Melissa, amused, stooped and kissed her. 'The pretty child!' thought she. 'No doubt this Hercules worships her, yet certainly he gave me a languishing glance!'

Out flew Primrose, who had intended to be the first to greet them, but had at the last minute gone back upstairs to put on her only pair of silk stockings to impress Melissa. 'A beauty, but so old!' was her mental comment on the visitor.

'Supper's ready,' called Mrs. Boone hospitably, smiling over Prim's shoulder.

'Not yet, mother! Wait a minute. Stephen hasn't

put Melissa in the rain barrel!' cried Primrose. 'He always puts a new girl in the rain barrel,' she explained.

Stephen flushed. What a chump Prim was at times, he reflected. His hesitation appeared significant to Prim. It amused her. She goaded him. 'Hurry up, silly. Supper's all ready and the good old custom can't be broken.'

Melissa smiled calmly, apparently in amused tolerance. Within she was conscious of blood coursing more rapidly. What thrills might be extracted from a society where giants seized women, bore them aloft, tossed them into rain barrels. Perfectly absurd, but yet — To struggle! To be subdued!

'Well, Stephen!' exclaimed Primrose teasingly.

He strode toward his sister, picked her up, no light burden either, flung her over a shoulder, and in spite of her screams, her beatings against his breast, and her hearty kicks, he strode with her to the rain barrel under the west window of the sitting-room, and lowered her in.

'Now see how you like it!' he growled and went off to supper. That was the worst of it. Mother Boone had complained about the hot biscuits with syrup, and they all went in regardless of Prim's plight. It was an enormous barrel. Her chin just cleared the top. Of course, it was clean and dry. Stephen always saw to that when a new girl was coming. The victim, of course, didn't know, expected a splash!

Not every one had deserted. Amory ambled toward her. 'What can I do for you?' he inquired affably.

She was still too angry to answer. 'The mean thing! Mean as pussley! Why wouldn't he put her in?'

'May I suggest that he was quite — well, rather bowled over?'

To Amory's amusement she stiffened. 'Why? I should like to know. Hasn't he got Letty? If you want to help me, please get a chair from the back porch ——'

He hurried to do her bidding. He handed it to her and she scrambled up on it. 'Now, if you'll lean hard against the rain barrel toward the house, I'll do the rest.'

She balanced lightly on the rim and sprang out in a wide arc, landing like a great cat on her feet.

'No one seems to care whether we have hot biscuits or not,' she remarked ruefully as they made their way to the dining-room.

Next Uncle Lige was a vacant place for Amory, and the guest had no opportunity to join in the general chat, for the old fellow undertook to instruct him in the rotation of crops with vast circumlocution and terms recondite.

After supper, Stephen led Melissa to the piano while the other women cleared away. With her sure touch she drew out the soul of the instrument at

which the Boones had only been able to speculate. She played 'Du bist die Ru'' and sang the German words in her husky sweet voice. Leaning over her shoulder he read the English translation: 'Thou art my peace, my sweet content.' He repeated the words aloud, not knowing that he did so. She bade him sing for her and he obeyed with ardor. What freedom it was to sing with an accompanist who need not be listened for, helped along! He had not known himself of what he was capable. He could now only guess. Out on the stoop, the Boones gathered to listen. It was a warm evening and the powerful vibrations of Stephen's mighty voice made distance add charm. The music ceased and Stephen in the breathing stillness fancied that the beauty of Melissa spoke. At last, he said, 'I'm not sure you're real.'

'Pinch me and see,' she retorted. He laid his big hand on the white forearm lying over the keyboard. She was looking up at him and, meeting her grave eyes, he flushed hotly and removed his hand.

'Shall we go outdoors?' she asked evenly. Stephen, in an agony of shyness, fearful of having offended, bewitched by her still loveliness, followed her, wretched, more luckless than he knew.

Outside on the stoop, the hospitable Boones were planning that the Vaughans should stay out the week, returning to town when Diana left for New York.

Diana made an excuse to enter the house and summoned her mother. 'You'll have to give Amory the

cubby-room and Melissa, Grandma Haynes',' she told her. 'They don't use the same room.'

'They will in my house,' said Mother Boone, outraged. 'The idea!'

Diana shrugged. After all, it wasn't her affair. Thus it came about that Melissa, in the cubby-room, heard Primrose's carrying voice as she talked with Diana.

'He's all right, but I've no use for her. She made the most awful eyes at Stephen right under Letty's ——' She ended with a sputter caused by Diana's firm hand over her mouth.

Amory heard too and turned his gaze unhappily on the sad face of little Bopeep. He could sympathize with her. He too had lost something.

During the stay at Beechwood, Melissa made no attempt to help with the house work, but she liked to sew and helped Diana with several dresses. It was a pretty sight, the four young women bending over their work; Melissa, silent, vaguely smiling, her white hands moving surely; Diana, her black brows frowning at her task; Primrose, impatient of difficulties, laughing, chatting; and little Letty, silent as Melissa, with depths of pain in her dark eyes.

As for Amory, he liked the Boones immensely. He helped the menfolk inefficiently, but Mother Boone cleverly. One morning he fried a great batch of doughnuts with a big white apron tied under his chin giving him the look of a pious choir boy. Much of the

time he spent sketching and that pleased the Boones best, for he loved the places they loved and drew out from them unsuspected beauty: Diana's Bath, the sentinel beech at the hilltop, the golden carpet where Amory fancied the great trees danced on autumn nights when the moon was full.

As for the evenings, they were full of lazy listening to Stephen and Melissa filling the night with ecstasy.

CHAPTER XVI

DIANA CAPITULATES

DIANA was going back to school 'dead broke.' Always a spendthrift she had through the summer showered gifts on Prim, her mother, and Letty, and now she had barely the purchase price of her ticket. She lacked sufficient margin for a seat in the parlor car and that did make her cross. The exceedingly early start from the farm, the devious path of the milk train, conspired to give her a headache so that it was with a grim countenance that she entered a day-coach on the Empire State. Two other teachers, friends of hers, equally impecunious, met her and reported a more affluent pair in the parlor car. Envy became added to Diana's sensations. At Syracuse another acquaintance joined them and the four secured a double seat. Diana in the mood for martyrdom offered to ride backward and the consequent nausea became an element in her discomfort. She felt a little better after eating. One of the young women used her suitcase for a table daintily covering it with white paper napkins. She had brought a good lunch from home and Letty had packed a box for Diana; fried chicken, some of Stephen's early celery, her own potato chips. One girl had a bottle of port and the fourth a box of choco-

lates. They enjoyed the little feast, but were conscious of hungry scrutiny from four pairs of dark eyes belonging to young Italians opposite. With one of her sudden, indulgent smiles, Diana offered them what was left. The children beamed and devoured its last crumb.

The day was hot; the train increasingly dirty. Diana could see her openwork waist marking out a stencilled pattern of soot on her neck and arms. Two or three couples were 'spooning' in a way which disgusted the teachers, making them purse their lips and look haughtily away and then back at the offenders.

It seemed to Diana she couldn't bear such a journey and the manner of life which went with it. 'If I were married to Roger I shouldn't be travelling in a day-coach. When I come this way at Christmas, it will be with him.' The thought was like a breath of life-giving air in the stifling car. Another sprang from it. 'Why wait? I hate the life I'm leading. I've lost interest in my work. Never again can I settle down to it. I'm all stirred up. Of course, Audrey's dead. If Roger wants me, I'll marry him next week. Next week can't come soon enough!'

With this decision her physical discomfort vanished, her unhappy air dropped from her like an unbecoming garment, she was cheerful, gay, full of funny stories, the Diana who was so popular among teachers.

When she left the train at the Grand Central, her mood had fallen into a minor. Roger was at the gate hardly able to stand still he was so glad to see her. He saw that she was tired and took her off in a cab. All the way he chatted pleasantly while Diana sat listening quietly.

He went up with her to the little apartment. Her housemates were not to return until Sunday night, so the place was empty. During the summer, a married student at Columbia had rented it from them, and alack! for its present condition! The prospect revealed by the gas light was inexpressibly dreary. Everything was coated with dust. Roger went from room to room lighting the gas. In the kitchen roaches scuttled in all directions. Diana shuddered and, racked by weariness and disgust, burst into tears.

He took her in his arms, soothing her tenderly. 'You can't live this way, my darling. Don't make us wait any longer. It's absurd. Marry me next week, my pretty poor.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' she sobbed. 'As soon as ever you can get a license.'

Roger went home full of deep content. He was half surprised that he could savor his joy so quietly, but knew that its very depth precluded ecstasy. His mind glided over pleasing pictures of his life with Diana. From what fine stock must this country girl have sprung! Her honesty was so assured, her tastes by nature so catholic! Their desires went side by side.

Books, pictures, music, children! He whistled softly as he ran up the steps of his apartment house.

The elevator boy spoke doubtfully to him. 'There's a lady gone up to your apartment, sir. Said she was Mrs. Wentworth.'

'Indeed?' asked Roger quietly.

The horrid shock almost stunned him. Not for a second did he doubt it was Audrey come back to the quick to be his undoing. He concluded that in his hurry to meet Diana's train he had left his door unlatched. Now he found it fastened and his agitation was so great that he had difficulty opening it.

A woman was sitting in a little huddle in a corner of the davenport. Roger drew a quick breath of relief. This was not Audrey. This was a palpable impostor, a smaller woman altogether than his wife, incredibly older. He strode across the room. She turned her black eyes full upon him and he fell back. It was Audrey right enough.

She spoke in her old quick tones. 'I couldn't get in without saying I was Mrs. Wentworth. I'm sorry. I had no notion of doing such a thing, but I was too wretched to go away and come again. I hope I'm not discommoding a new Mrs. Wentworth,' she went on in her old mocking way. Beneath it Roger detected a current of poignant earnest. Had it always been there? Had he, in the pride of his youth, in his intolerance, been unable to hear what had so dreadfully needed hearing?

'I am not married,' he answered heavily. 'I expect to be shortly.'

She was silent. Her great eyes were fixed on his. Suddenly she smiled as if to draw him into a magic circle which should exclude the woman to whom he was promised. 'We mustn't let her know of this. I'm really sick, Roger, not faking. I've come because I've no place else to go. I'm actually dying and seriously inconvenienced for a place to die in. Of course there are such places, but I seem not to be in touch with them. Your heart was always your susceptible organ. It occurred to me you might pity the erring and finance me in some hospital for the necessary time.'

While she was speaking, he had been realizing that she was only a rack of bones, her dress was poor, starvation or some insidious disease had brought her well on to the house of Death.

'You should have come long ago,' he said hoarsely.

She gave him a heart-breaking smile. 'My pride outlived my morals. Besides, I knew you well enough to realize that the greater my need the more sure would be my welcome.'

'Have you seen a doctor?' he demanded.

She shook her head. 'No money, and I never can seem to manage the way other people of my kind do. At any rate, it's too late. Cancer. Horrid thing! All I want is a clean place to die in. Not to suffer so much, too.'

She met his pitying eyes with a hardy look.

'I'll telephone at once for a doctor,' he said.

'No, no, not to-night. I can't see one until I have something better than this to wear. I don't want to disgrace you all over again.'

'Have you anything with you?' he asked.

'Not a thing.'

'I'll draw you a bath. I can give you pajamas. Then I'll get you something to eat. Do you still like the water hot as hot?'

She nodded. 'Such luxury! A great tubful, please, Roger.'

While she bathed, he opened the bed in the guest room. Then he foraged for food, thankful for the small favor of his Jap's being away over the week-end.

Coming in with his tray, he found her lying exhausted in the bed. She was now more like his old Audrey. Her hair lay in meek braids beside the white wedge of a face. He had brought tea and toast. She looked so starved, he had not dared bring heartier food. She drank the tea thirstily, but could not eat.

'I thought you were hungry,' he said disappointedly.

'I ought to be. But I can't seem to eat, though it's very nice,' she said politely. 'Roger,' she went on hurriedly, 'better burn those rags.'

He nodded.

'Roger, I don't want you to go to any great expense. Just a little room such as the virtuous wife of

a college professor has a right to die in. Will the expense embarrass you?' she demanded anxiously.

'Not a bit,' he said promptly. 'I've had private means these ten years, Audrey. But if it took every cent, I'd do it just as willingly.'

Interest dawned in her eyes. 'Then you don't hate me? You're not indifferent?'

'No. I thought I was. I'm not.'

'You should be,' she said lightly. 'Nothing deader than defunct love, the poets tell us.'

'There's too much to marriage for that,' he answered heavily.

'I don't want to get you into trouble with your fiancée.'

'No danger.'

'She need never know.'

'On the contrary, she must be told, but it won't change her.'

'Oh, yes,' she answered confidently. 'She may have thought I didn't matter, but that was while I was an abstraction.'

'It wouldn't be fair to keep her in ignorance. Nothing can come between us.'

She winced at that. After a pause she said, 'You are wondering, Roger, if my outward sackcloth is evidence of an inward repentance.'

'Such a thought never occurred to me,' he protested.

'It will. Once and for all, I tell you I'm not one bit

repentant. I know I've been a fool, but I insist life hasn't treated me fairly. It's just a terrible, blind force that's beaten me and buffeted me and driven me and now is going to push me over the rim of the world. Of course, I admit I was never docile, never teachable. Isn't it strange that, when I'm for the first time in my life in a receptive mood, it's too late for me to learn anything?'

'You used to believe in God, Audrey. If you believe in Him, you can't think it's too late. Surely teaching is more His prerogative than punishment.'

'Are there celestial schools for fallen women?' she asked flippantly. 'Mary Magdalene, instructress.' With a quick change she added wistfully, 'I'm not really making fun, Roger.'

He nodded miserably. 'But now you must get some sleep. Shall I turn out the light?'

'Please don't,' she begged. 'Pain is easier to bear in the light and I've always been a little afraid of the dark. Have you forgotten?'

His heart smote him. He remembered that childish trait. He tiptoed out of the room.

She had left her dingy garments in a neat pile on the bathroom floor. Intending to burn them in the fireplace, he carried them gingerly into the library. He laid them on the table, noticing as he did so the patches. They had all been mended but the stockings. Those had evidently been hopeless. Audrey had cut off the feet. Those tender feet he had kissed!

Those little feet he had held in the palms of his hands! He sat down and buried his face on his arms. He thought his heart would break over those terrible stockings without feet. His tears broke down whatever wall of bitterness separated his heart from hers. She who had been his wife would have nothing worse to bear from him than pity.

During the night he heard Audrey moaning, but found her asleep, restless and suffering. As soon as day dawned, he went to a drug store near by and telephoned Diana.

The ring awakened the girl and she came sleepily to the instrument, but at Roger's voice she was instantly alert. The happy thought came to her that he had been afraid he had dreamed her promise to marry him at once. He was just making sure of her.

She heard Roger speaking. 'Diana, Audrey came home last night.' That word 'home' struck her hardest.

'Well?' she asked lifelessly. He was so long silent that she thought the connection broken.

Then he said: 'She's frightfully ill. Dying, I believe. I'll try to get her placed in a hospital to-day. Will you help me, Diana?'

'What do you want me to do?'

'She's destitute. Absolutely. The stores are closed. She isn't fit even to see a doctor.'

'I understand,' Diana rejoined evenly. 'I'll pack a bag with what is necessary. I believe we are much

alike. That was what first attracted you in me, wasn't it?'

There was another long silence. Then he said: 'Do nothing for me, Diana, unless you can give your heart to it. I am asking you as if you were already my wife to assist an unfortunate woman who has a claim upon me. I can't put it clearer than that. If I have asked too much of your generosity, leave me to manage by myself.'

'If I'm angry, it's not at you. Just when we were so happy!' she retorted. 'I'll come at once. Good-bye!' and she hung up the receiver and sank down upon a chair near it.

'"The thing which I greatly feared has come upon me,"' she quoted solemnly. 'How much I must have wanted her to die!' She began crying out loud like a child. Then she laughed at herself, but the sound shocked her into silence. She looked hastily around as if she feared observers. After that she went into the bathroom to bathe and dress talking all the while to herself in a low, bitter voice. 'I shall never get married now. I shall be an old maid and live with mice and cockroaches and be frightened to death at them.'

When she was dressed she made coffee and brought in the cream and rolls which had been left outside her door. She ate and drank standing as if she were in great haste.

She had been too weary the night before to unpack

her bag. Now she lifted it onto the bed and dumped the contents into a confused heap. This action was so unlike orderly Diana that she stared in astonishment as if some one else had impertinently piled her belongings in an untidy clutter.

She pulled out her best taffeta, her best shoes, her only pair of gray silk stockings, and flung them angrily into the bag. Over them she laid nightgowns she had embroidered for her trousseau. She put in more lingerie of her best and on top of everything threw in the silver comb and brush set she had bought for her wedding journey. She was thinking every minute that Roger had asked a frightful thing of her and that she was doing all he asked and more too. If he had demanded a pound of flesh, she had made no denial of the blood which went with it. He had not even been willing to leave Audrey while he came after the clothing. That thought made her tremble with passion. She would take them every step of the way with her feet bleeding. She would offer them to him. She would do all he asked and then never, never see him again. The chains which she had hugged now galled her. She yearned for her old freedom. All affections were fetters. Every moment jealousy of Audrey mounted. She told herself that the wet moss and dead leaves had been removed and Roger had found his love for his lost wife a precious blossoming plant.

With a white, set face she arrived at his Park Av-

enue home. Roger admitted her instantly. He held out both hands to her, but with a stern gesture she put the bag into them.

He set it down and looked at her with a troubled expression. He was haggard; had, as people say, grown ten years older overnight.

'Good-bye,' Diana muttered in a tragic voice, but he drew her farther into the room and closed the door. Endearments he did not proffer.

'Don't be cruel, Diana,' he said simply.

A sob rose in her throat. His love was no longer a chain or, if it were, she prayed it had no weak link. They looked piteously at each other. Each forgot suffering for the moment in the other's pain.

'Audrey wishes very much to see you,' he said.

She shook her head.

'It was against her advice that I asked your help. She is dying. She never injured you. She can't harm you.'

'She harms me by living,' Diana burst out passionately.

He looked gravely at her. 'Are you so hard, Diana?' he asked quietly.

Her eyelids burned. She pointed to the bag and spoke proudly. 'I did what you asked. I did much more than you asked.' After a little in a meek voice she continued, 'I will do everything you ask. If you insist, I will see her.'

At Audrey's door, he stepped back and she entered

alone. Seeing her there made all the hate go out of her heart. She felt curiously empty like a toy balloon. Audrey looked like a child in the bed. Her hollow eyes were fixed expectantly on the doorway. Her color was queer. Not a pretty thing about her except her dark braids and those enormous eyes. Not pretty those. Terribly beautiful. What had they seen? Medusa?

On seeing Diana, her face took on a childish expression.

'How capable you look!' she said. 'And you're very pretty. I always liked pretty girls. I'm so glad you're the kind you are. It is good of you to let me have some things. You see I haven't any pride left. But I don't like disgracing Roger. I do seem to have some pride for him. I'm to leave the world quite respectably as Mrs. Wentworth. That is, if you don't mind?'

Diana laughed shakily and said she didn't mind. She brought in the bag and helped Audrey into a nightgown. The older woman expostulated when she saw the toilet set and the dainty lingerie. Instantly she knew for what a different use they had been intended. 'No, no, no,' she said vehemently.

'But I want you to have them,' said Diana, amazed at finding she spoke the truth.

'What a good girl you are!' said Audrey. 'Will you come to see me often?' Diana promised. 'You will think me queer to like you and be so unreserved, but

it doesn't seem worth while to pretend any longer,' Audrey went on. 'Will you stay for the doctor?'

Again Diana promised. She busied herself setting the room to rights. She felt very queer. Here was Audrey, who was, to come down to muttons, a bad woman, bad as they made 'em. But she didn't look bad. She didn't seem bad. Diana had come hating her. Now she didn't hate her. Was just sorry for her. She still wanted her to die, but that was for Audrey's sake as being very plainly the course she'd determined on and most likely to bring her happiness. For her sake or Roger's she wouldn't wish her a pennyweight of harm. How like a black curtain Audrey's past divided her from them! She knew instinctively that Audrey was only unreserved when reticence did not matter. That dark curtain would never be lifted. Audrey might look behind and commune with grotesque phantoms stalking there. She and Roger weren't to know anything about all that.

The doctor came, a pompous, white-haired, youngish man. 'Tut, tut!' said he severely. 'Great neglect, madame, criminal neglect!'

'I know,' said Audrey quietly.

He looked sharply at her and after that was very gentle.

'How long?' asked Audrey.

'Much depends on the constitution. It's difficult to prognosticate, but I should surmise a short period. Only a few weeks probably.'

She smiled as if with satisfaction. A moment later she raised her dark eyes interrogatively. 'Suffer?' she asked in a delicate voice. It was a tiny white thread of sound in the drab silence.

'No, no,' he assured her. 'Not much. We'll keep you comfortable, Mrs. Wentworth.' Diana saw her wince at the name.

Diana went with them to the hospital riding for the first time in a taxicab. She stayed until she saw Audrey established in a sober little room with a capable, cheery nurse. It was too late to operate and they all knew that Audrey wasn't to leave that narrow white bed on this side of Death. Diana went away promising to come almost daily after school at which hour Roger agreed not to visit.

CHAPTER XVII

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA

The Vaughans found the little Todd house very quiet after their week in the busy world of Beechwood. They had both brought thence the sensation of having been extraordinarily gay. Every one on the farm seemed happy; even little Letty gave the effect of happiness; she was so quiet, so patient, and so grateful for the kindness shown her. The old people's silence suggested deep peace springing from the years of prosperity, from their pride in their children and their contented faith in God's goodness. To them death was but the difficult passage into a fuller life where they should continue to labor side by side.

Amory found his outlook meagre enough when he contrasted it with theirs. To him life could never be happy and, at best, he hoped only to avoid bleak misery. As for the existence after death he was vague, indeed. He could scarcely believe that his eager spirit, so much more alive than his delicate frame, could be quenched when that ceased to be. Yet who could say, since no one had ever brought back tidings from that Debatable Country? And if there were such a land of beauty inexhaustible, of song and joy immortal, *cui bono?* Not for him, he thought.

Melissa, singing cheerily of Paradise, thought of it not a whit, neither believed nor disbelieved, was bent only on extracting whatever sweet there was in the roots of this life. At thirty she had begun to fear it would not be long enough for her to exhaust its possibilities, and she was concerned to taste often and savor fully.

After one quiet day in the village, Amory came in from a walk and briskly addressed his wife: 'Melissa, just lend a hand, will you? I've a full evening before me. I'm going camping to-morrow morning before cockcrow, if the blamed thing doesn't crow too early. Want to come?'

Melissa raised her eyebrows and spoke languidly. 'Not if you gave me my weight in gold.'

'In that case, there's no use of arguments,' he answered dryly. 'There's nothing left to offer.'

'How long shall you be gone?'

'Four or five days, if we don't have too much rain. It's imperative I go at once, for it will soon be bitter cold in these hills.'

'There are snakes,' she suggested, 'rattlers, too, Diana told me.'

'Nonsense,' he answered. 'I'm no more likely to run into a rattler here than a lion loose in Bronx Park. I couldn't get a caravan, of course. I couldn't hope for such transcendent good fortune, but I have a democrat.'

'Have you horses?' she asked skeptically.

'Sophie May,' he acknowledged, crestfallen.

She laughed at him. 'Five days away! Sophie May will die in her tracks by to-morrow night. You and Sophie May! What a pair!'

Amory flushed deeply. Melissa had not meant an allusion to his lameness. She too colored painfully, and said earnestly: 'I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I meant only that you were so urban, so elegant — sophisticated and Sophie May ——' she floundered. To make up for hurting his feelings, she bestirred herself to good purpose. She was far more practical than he and she made sensible suggestions as to his camping kit, looked over his clothes and packed for him, a good deal of trouble for indolent Melissa! She did venture one more remonstrance. 'Country people are far more critical than you realize. In New York no one cares or notices what we do, but here you're under constant surveillance. I'm afraid they'll think you're crazy, going camping in September with that old scarecrow of a Sophie May!'

He looked at her in amusement. 'I hate to disgrace you, Melissa. Personally, it doesn't matter to me at all what these good country people think. Their lives don't seem to have a great deal of humor and, if I can furnish interest or amusement, I ought to be humbly proud. Will you be afraid to stay alone here?'

'Indeed, not,' she returned scornfully. 'If I were I could have Phalinda, but I'd far rather be by myself.'

She found the first day very pleasurable. She had a

slight grievance against Amory for going, but it was sweet to be alone with herself and her own thoughts. Phalinda came to do up the work and, when the dishes from the noon dinner were finished, Melissa told her not to come back until the next day. She promised herself a supper of golden brown toast with sweet butter and tea not bitter as gall. She took her embroidery and sat down in the sitting-room window for a busy afternoon. She worked steadily from one until four on the waist she was doing. Every little while she stopped to see how much she had accomplished and then with an approving smile she continued. She set herself to do one spray during the afternoon. There were one hundred and twenty eyelets in the spray and Melissa, who hated exerting her lovely body, would work patiently hours on end at this intricate embroidery.

At last she finished the spray. Her eyes were tired. The thought of having to wear glasses occurred to her and struck horror to her heart. She'd give up embroidery first. Fortunately she didn't care so very much about reading. She folded her work and put it away carefully in the dresser drawer where she had piled the Todd coffin plates and the pictures of the Baptist ministers. She paused before she shut the drawer. It occurred to her that she was in danger of being bored.

'Come out, brethren,' she said in gay mockery. 'Come out and spend the afternoon with Sister Me-

lissa.' She hung them on their nails and drew her chair opposite the row. 'I always get on best with the gentlemen,' she told them with a demure smile. One of the pictures was of an anæmic-looking young man. Something in the face reminded her of Amory. She rose, took down the portrait and shut it in the drawer. 'You've too familiar a face,' she murmured, 'and your countenance isn't cheery enough for a party.' Her gaze fell next on a choleric-looking old fellow with a white stock enveloping his neck and muffling his chin.

'You look as if Hell were your middle name,' she told him calmly. 'I'm glad I don't have to sit under you. Instead I'm the voice of the afternoon. You have to be quite quiet and listen. Aren't you ashamed to look so cross at all of us poor sinners? And have you the right? Weren't you the wildest sort of a young fellow yourself? How about the apples you stole from the widow's tree? How about playing poker in the barn? How about the hard cider? And didn't you ever kiss a girl when nobody was looking?' She shook her finger at him playfully, half expecting him to don a sheepish look. Instead his wrathful, denunciatory expression worked so against her frivolous mood that she rose, swept down all the portraits, piled them in the drawer and slammed it shut. 'The coffin plates would have been jollier,' she complained.

She sat down again feeling rather dreary. 'If I'd

not been so pretty, probably I'd have been more easily content. I'd have stayed at home and married some good farmer. I'd have had children and taken care of chickens and dressed on the egg money; I'd have washed the milk cans and put them in the sun all shining. Every year I'd have grown older and uglier. I'd be an old crone now with a high stomach and babies running neglected all over the farm getting poison ivy and stepping on rusty nails. I'd rather be unhappy the way I am than happy in such a life. Letty would be like that if she could have children and if Stephen were content to vegetate here. The boy's half in love with me. It's a good thing for him. It will prepare him to take care of himself when he's out in the world and women without scruples fling themselves at him.'

She started suddenly at a loud knock. It was followed immediately by the unceremonious opening of the front door. She could see Stephen striding toward her through the little parlor.

'Hullo, Melissa.' Country fashion, none of the Boones had dreamed of calling the Vaughans, Mr. and Mrs. 'You alone?'

She gave him a wistful smile, a tiny shrug. 'A widow woman,' she assured him. 'Amory has gone camping. He looks like a tramp,' she added with some asperity.

Stephen looked surprised. 'Late for camping,' he remarked. 'Hope he took bedclothes enough.'

'He wants to get some sketches of the pines and Fairview Hill, then the lake over that way. He'll be gone four or five days.'

As she spoke, with seeming irrelevance she recalled certain words in Proverbs: 'For the good man is not at home: He is gone a long journey. He will return at the day appointed.' Well for Stephen, she thought, that she was not like that woman. He sat down at the cottage piano which Melissa had rented. His big fingers picked out the melody of a song she had left on the rack.

'I like this,' he said abruptly. 'Play it for me, Melissa.'

Nothing loath, she came over and took the stool he vacated. He went for a chair and put it beside her. For an hour they practised. Stephen was not an adept at reading and Melissa helped him out with her rich throaty voice.

'Some of the great singers have to be taught everything by rote,' she assured him, laughingly adding, 'Brains don't always go with a voice.'

Once he laid his hand on her shoulder. Absorbed in the music, he had done it just as he might to Letty or Prim, but as it rested there such a thrill of delight ran through him that he thought Melissa must have felt it. At any rate, she smilingly put up her hand and took his down with it, her own action rather a caress than a rebuke.

'Holy Moses!' he exclaimed presently. 'It's half-

past five. By the time I get home they'll have had supper.'

'Have some with me,' she suggested. 'That is, if you can put up with a widow woman's fare. I'll tell you — have a bite now just to stay your stomach until you get to Beechwood. I'm just going to have cinnamon toast and tea — five o'clock tea we call it in New York. Then we have dinner at eight!'

'That gives you four meals,' Stephen commented approvingly. He followed her to the kitchen and watched her with admiring eyes as she poked the range fire.

She emptied the tea-kettle and put in fresh water from the pump.

'The other was almost to a boil. Why do you do that?' he asked.

'To make the tea better, silly,' she told him. She opened the bread box and, taking the white loaf, cut it in slices and trimmed off all the crusts.

'I never saw any one do that before,' he remarked as he sauntered over to eat up the crusts she had removed. She put cinnamon and sugar in a shaker, and set the plate of butter to warm. She let him toast the bread over the glowing coals. Then she finished the work delicately and piled the brown slices on a plate in the oven. When it was all ready, they drew their chairs up to the stove. Melissa scandalized Stephen by putting a slice of lemon in her tea. His own cup he filled with milk. Privately he thought the tea

like dishwater — no body to it. Of course, Melissa couldn't be expected to cook like Letty.

The last crumb of golden toast disappeared.

'Now you must hurry home,' she commanded. 'If you tell them that you saw me, say I gave you toast and tea and you thought it pretty small fare even when I called it afternoon tea.'

'I shan't tell them,' he said suddenly with a sulky look.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PICNIC

'I DO like Amory,' said Mrs. Boone dolorously, 'but I declare to goodness seems sometimes as if he wa'n't responsible. Any one who'd go camping this time of year ain't real bright. Leaving a good home and a comfortable feather bed! Now I think the whole lot of you's crazy. Picnic this weather!' she sniffed scornfully.

'Oh, yes, Mother Boone,' urged Melissa brightly. 'It's not cold if it is September and we can have a fire and take along some things to cook. You know the place Amory's camping is the regular picnic ground. It would be great fun to surprise him and so much nicer for us all to go. You'll come, won't you, Uncle Lige?' she flashed her glorious smile on him.

'If so be as it were the blossom time of the year, I'd convene with the rest of ye,' he assured her. 'But man is heir to afflictions and rheumatism afflicts me mightily. I do fear with heart-shaking and trepidation the frosts of the autumn, and as soon would I sit me down on a red-hot stove lid as on the earth in this season. While the rest of ye go gallivanting, I will remain and ruminate and chew the cud of reflection.'

'Father Boone, you won't refuse?' she pleaded, turning to the old farmer. She wished to include them all since Primrose and Letty would have to be of the party. It would be far gayer, far less strained to have a larger crowd. Besides, she was good-natured enough to want them to share in the fun and she saw that Mother Boone, behind her disapproving front, was longing for the treat. Primrose too yearned to go, but said firmly that it must be on Saturday, not Friday, as Melissa had suggested. 'I can't let out school for anything short of a wedding or a funeral,' she told them.

'Goodness!' thought Melissa with irritation, 'I have to work so to get them started I'll be exhausted before the great event.'

Amory had been gone two days on his camping trip. It seemed to Melissa that every farmer who had come to town had stopped to give her news of him. He had been observed sitting before an easel by the shore of the lake near the station, daubing on colors which the reporter had never observed in Nature. He had been seen in the afternoon of the same day, at the top of Fairview Hill, where he had been hospitably asked to take supper at the farm. Afterward he had been entreated to pass the night out of the cold of his camping ground and the family had met his refusal with admiration for his firmness and contempt for his brains. Next morning he had been seen south of town sketching in the gorge. Sophie

May had stood the ten-mile journey nobly, largely, it was thought, because Amory had walked the entire distance. Now he had skirted the town and encamped in the pine wood at the foot of the Boone Hill, a mile or so from Letty's stepfather's farm. Melissa had grown weary of these couriers and their tidings borne with ill-disguised amusement. She was tired of her own company and toward supper time she had shut her house door behind her and started to walk to Beechwood.

The family there greeted her with enthusiasm, but could scarcely believe that she had walked the distance.

'You walked, Melissa?' cried Prim incredulously. 'I never supposed you'd do anything so strenuous.'

'Indeed, I'm a *good* walker,' protested Melissa. 'I walk a great deal.'

'We never thought of your doing anything like that,' said Letty apologetically. 'We always think of you just playing the piano and singing and looking beautiful.'

'I can do anything I want to do,' said Melissa with unwonted candor. 'When I was a girl I lived in the country and I worked just as hard as you do. When I grew up I made up my mind I'd never do a thing I didn't want to do unless I absolutely had to. And I don't. And I don't often have to either.'

Primrose looked at her with interest. Melissa was promulgating her own doctrine of freedom, but on

her lips it sounded unbeautiful. 'Doesn't it make you selfish?' she asked with interest.

'I don't care if it does,' retorted Melissa. Then she gave what Primrose called her 'syrupy smile.' 'Do you think I'm selfish, dear?' she asked sweetly.

'Huh!' said Primrose meditatively.

'So we're to picnic Saturday!' said Melissa now, as the discussion ended. 'I must be starting back,' and she rose reluctantly from the supper table.

'I'll drive you,' interposed Stephen eagerly.

'Of course, you'll stay until Saturday,' said Mrs. Boone hospitably and Melissa willingly complied.

The next day was the pleasantest she had spent at Beechwood. Under Diana's honest eyes she had always felt a restraint. Amory too had that trick of fixing upon her his critical stare. There was now no one at Beechwood to be disapproving except Primrose who was too young a chit to be noticed. No one else except perhaps old Uncle Lige and his opinion could scarcely matter.

Saturday was as warm and bright a day as if it were mid-August. Melissa took credit to herself for the weather. Everybody was very jolly. Mother Boone had put aside her disapproving front and entered whole-heartedly into preparing the lunch. Old Jaffrey was to drive her and Primrose and Letty in the surrey with the lunch. Melissa was to come with Stephen behind the Little Mare, though no one could have explained how such an arrangement had

been made. Thus it happened that shortly before noon Amory busily engaged painting a bit of the creek, where edged with great willows it diverged and swept by the pine wood, heard the swift heels of the Little Mare and the voices of Stephen and Melissa. He looked up half annoyed, but when they told him who were following and all the plans, he could but be pleased.

'Only let me have half an hour more of this light,' he pleaded.

Old Jaffrey's party soon arrived and the farmer began at once to assure Amory that his camping days were over for that year.

'Back to town for you, young man, when the sun sets,' he insisted. 'Rain is coming, the air's full of it and the equinoctial's like to be early.'

Amory agreed. 'I've done a lot,' he said with satisfaction. 'I've enough to work on for a good bit.'

Old Jaffrey said nothing. Privately he thought Amory wasting his time. Still he didn't grudge the poor lame chap his painting any more than he would a child his toy. This young fellow wasn't meant for real use in the world. 'Ever sell any?' he inquired curiously.

Melissa understood the old man's thought. Amory belonged to her and she wasn't going to have him undervalued. She mentioned a sum which Amory had received for a painting. Amory frowned, but

old Jaffrey looked at him with amazement and new respect.

Amory enjoyed the picnic lunch as much as any one. Primrose and Letty spread a white tablecloth and weighted it at the corners with stones. Stephen had made a fire under Melissa's direction and the battered coffee-pot was sending up a heavenly odor. There were baked beans, sliced ham, olives, pickles, raised biscuits, apple pie, berry pie, three kinds of cake, cheese, and a freezer full of ice cream. Mrs. Boone received her share of the feast seated in the surrey. She had refused to risk rheumatism by sitting on the ground and, as she was a good feeder, she kept Letty and Amory busy in her service.

After his dinner old Jaffrey climbed in beside her, with all the evident signs of somnolence. Presently he and old Margaret were both sound asleep. Letty, Primrose, and Amory rinsed the dishes in the creek, packed up the lunch, and afterwards gathered Amory's paraphernalia. Meantime Melissa had said she would go look for wintergreen farther down by the pasture beyond the pines. Primrose had told her it abounded there. Stephen watched her blue linen disappearing and reappearing through the trees. Before she was out of sight, he rose to his feet, muttered a lame excuse, and made after her. She was walking slowly with her head bent searching for the glossy green leaves. When he caught up with her, she dropped her pretense and walked on with

lengthened strides. As he kept pace with her, he thought what a grand free thing it was to walk thus with this tall strong woman. Letty had always to trip along, three steps to his two. There was no pleasure in such unrhythmic progress.

'You're just perfect,' he said with conviction. 'I think you were made for me, Melissa.'

She said nothing. Something in this autumn day, with its hint of midsummer in the fallen leaves, in the acrid smell of distant forest fires, most of all in the stark masculinity of Stephen, had a strange effect on her. Roger had judged her a woman of strong passions, but, if he was right, she was honestly ignorant of them. She was filled now with a sense of brooding events, her emotions stifled while they perplexed her. She looked up at Stephen. She would not confess to herself how she panted to be in his arms. His gaze was reverent and adoring. It was not reverence she wanted. It seemed to her that she hated him. She turned about and walked rapidly back to the others. He took a step in pursuit, then paused and stood gazing moodily after her retreating figure.

The rest of the party had finished their labors and sat or stood in attitudes of expectancy. The elder Boones had clambered out of the surrey and were beside Amory's democrat neatly packed for his return to civilization. Melissa, still angry, called to her husband: 'I'll not be seen riding back with you in that contraption. Come along with me, Prim. The

Little Mare will get me home in five minutes and you can come back for Stephen.' As she spoke, she was untying the Little Mare regardless of her vicious show of teeth, and in an instant more had seated herself in the buggy before Primrose, behaving like a slow Boone as she was, had made up her mind what to answer. The Little Mare gave her indeed scant time. She had taken Melissa's movement for a signal, but just as she laid back her ears and prepared to settle into her beautiful even gait, a pine cone fell from the tree above striking her a smart blow on the head. She never needed much to frighten her. This was more than enough. With a great lurch and a bound, she was off.

'Hang on! Hang on!' cried the farmer in a panic.

'Don't jump! Don't jump!' screamed Prim.

Their voices seemed to add to the terror of the maddened animal. She tore along the bank of the creek over the carpet of pine needles which covered the uneven ground. Melissa gasped with horror as she approached the road. She pulled hard upon the right-hand rein, for it seemed safer not to risk crossing the bridge, but she might as well have tried to direct the storm-clouds which were gathering unnoticed in the northwest. Some obscure prompting did indeed turn the Little Mare into the road toward home, and Melissa felt if she would but keep to it she would soon weary of the uphill way and become manageable. She was courageous and strong and

held unflinchingly the reins which cruelly cut her ungloved hands. The light buggy was tossed from side to side like a fragile boat in the breakers. At every moment it threatened to overturn. It was a race between the endurance of the Little Mare and that of the frail vehicle. Melissa had Prim's warning in her ears; she had always been told never to jump, but in her rising panic she could scarcely control the impulse toward casting herself forth. Now she had safely passed the first bend of the road, had gone by the house of John Huddis, and was at the steep turn at the foot of the Boone Hill. The Little Mare made the curve, but just beyond, the right-hand wheel struck a great boulder.

Melissa opened her eyes wearily and saw gazing down at her the solicitous face of Uncle Lige. She did not try to speak.

'Are you injured internally?' he asked anxiously.

Melissa gave a wan smile. 'You couldn't expect me to know that, yet,' she murmured. She moved her arms and legs warily. 'I believe I'm all whole,' she said in amazement. 'I'm not even lame yet. I suppose that will come later.'

'Was Steve with you?' the old man asked anxiously.

'I was all alone,' she told him. 'How did you happen to be down here?' she asked curiously.

'The hour for doing the chores was yet somewhat

distant,' he began, 'and a portentous storm appeared to be gathering, so in my judgment it was a worthy thought that I should descend the hill and warn the merrymakers, and ride back with them. On my descent, and but scarce as it were a moment past, I met the Little Mare with what was left of the buggy, and she, being by then docile and tractable, I knew she would make for home and therefore I came on at top speed to see what had befallen. Seeing a woman here I looked to find it should be Primrose, it being beyond the bigness of Letty. Do ye think ye can walk?' he inquired anxiously.

Melissa, dazed and bewildered, rose with his help and put her dragging feet in motion up the hill. She had his arm and leaned heavily upon it. He was not long silent, but began speaking in a low, grave voice. Only a few of the words pierced Melissa's consciousness.

'As man and boy, I have lived in Beechwood all my years,' he was saying. 'Man and boy.' A profound silence ensued, broken only by a pebble dislodged by their steps rolling down hill and the noise of Uncle Lige's heavy boots. 'We've known sorrows and afflictions, but they've been laid on us by the Lord's hand and thus we were able to endure. Loss of harvests, bodily ails, Jaffrey's flitting, death of the ancients, and the infant son that did no more than breathe, and Stephen's son that never did draw breath. In all these there was no shame, no igno-

miny. Only sin makes sufferings not to be borne. I opine that many Solons have held it as hard for a beautiful woman to be good as for the rich to enter heaven. In my judgment it ought not so to be. God made you more in His image than most. Your flesh is streaked white and pink like the spring beauty in the beech wood. You are tall and fair, as it might be an angel that stands beholding His countenance. It is my earnest prayer that your heart may be found fashioned in accordance with your outward grace. Have you rolled sin under your tongue as a sweet morsel? Nay, Melissa. Is thy heart right with God?' he ended with indescribable solemnity.

Melissa, still vague and shaken, was not sure she had heard aright. If she had, she ought to reprove him, put him in his place as an old busybody.

Behind her up the hill sounded hurrying feet. Without turning her head she knew them for the flying feet of her lover! Should she ever hear behind her the thunder of pursuit and know herself the quarry of the Furies tracking her as eagerly, more relentlessly than did Stephen? She relinquished her hold on Uncle Lige's arm.

'I can go no farther,' she said simply. 'I must wait here.' She sank wearily to the ground beneath a flaming sumac and turned her expectant gaze toward Stephen.

'Thank God! Melissa, thank God!' he murmured, falling to his knees before her, laying his hand upon

her, not in a caress, but as if to assure himself she was her actual self. She smiled at him tremulously.

'She can't walk,' said Uncle Lige in a matter-of-fact voice. 'She aims to sit right where she is until the surrey heaves into view. You, Stephen, when you've got control of your breathing apparatus, had best go down to meet them and assure your parents and her spouse of her safety.'

Stephen was still panting, still drawing laboring breaths. 'You're not winded, Uncle Lige,' he gasped out. 'I've run most three miles at top speed. You go tell them.'

Uncle Lige said nothing, but made no motion to obey, and there the three waited until presently the surrey appeared with its agitated passengers.

That night Melissa lay again at Beechwood. The doctor had been sent for and had discovered no injuries besides the many bruises from the rough ride and the heavy fall, but her discomfort was intense. She shared the cubby chamber with Amory and endured her pain courageously. Once only she cried aloud.

'Poor girl! What is it? Can you get no rest?' Amory asked compassionately.

'I was asleep, I think. I must have had a bad dream. Tell me, Amory, did you hear any one speak?' she asked in a frightened whisper.

He had heard nothing but her cry. She thought she had heard a voice, a mournful voice questioning,

'Melissa, is thy heart right with God?' She could not be certain whether the voice had come from without or had arisen mysteriously from her own soul.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FLOOD

Max was dead. He had caught his foot in a skunk trap, and in his fright and pain had struggled so furiously that he had freed himself. The injury was severe and in spite of all the care Letty had taken of him, it became infected and Stephen had to shoot the poor beast. Stephen had compassion on Max's suffering and put him out of his misery. On Letty's pain he had no compassion. No one put a term to her anguish.

Whatever poor weapons she possessed, she had long ago exhausted their power. She made no effort to wrestle against Melissa. Her tongue sought no confidant, but her eyes betrayed her secret. The elder Boones saw her suffer, and their silence, which had bespoken a deep content, now imperfectly hid their uneasiness and disapproval.

As for Stephen he had for the first time encountered Romance. It was strange that this should be so, for he had all his life lived in romantic surroundings, a land of varied charm, of bold hills and smiling valleys. His mother as she had been in his boyhood would have been a fit model for the figurehead of a sailing vessel, his sisters were women of rare

beauty, his father had been cast in an heroic mould, his young wife was lovely of heart and face. Stephen had, however, an imagination never vigorous and quite untrained. He was no reader; he had never travelled. He had no grounds for comparison. Letty's beauty did not count with him, for he did not know she was beautiful. He found her, in a word, commonplace, and youth loves not the commonplace.

He had not drifted into this luckless business. Rather he had plunged in, his eyes bandaged, his limbs shackled by his chaining senses. He could neither struggle against the current nor perceive whither it bore him. He belonged to a pious family in an uncompromising age. He had been taught that sin was sin. Sometimes because of this the strong current tossed him for a brief respite on the shore, and, tearing aside the bandage from his eyes, he would strive to rid himself of his fetters. Then the rocks of disgust and self-loathing impaled him. Looking upward he beheld Melissa shining like a bright, baleful star, and the dark stream of passion tore him from the rocks and engulfed him. He put his trust in that star. He believed it to be of undimmed brilliance. He might sin in his heart, he would gladly have sinned with his body, but Melissa's virtue was impregnable. Only in the longing of his glance and in the new passion of his music dared he betray his adoration.

There was a tiny brown mole at the back of Melissa's neck just below the fair waves of hair. This little blemish seemed a link between them. He fancied something not quite perfect in her brought her nearer his sullied soul. When he was singing and she played, he would stare at it fixedly and long to kiss it.

Melissa found that her uneasiness was only increased by thinking of the present. When she was away from Stephen, she dwelt much on scenes in the future. She pictured him a world-renowned tenor and fancied him remembering her with gratitude as his early inspiration. He visited her in her Parisian apartment. She was then old, of course, but lovely still, a perfect cameo — blanched face, carved features. Amory was dead and she his wealthy widow; Letty long since had been brushed from Stephen's path. But Melissa had had no hand in that. She had been too good-natured. Besides, no breath of scandal had clung to her.

She little dreamed that there was scandal already. Even before her coming speculation had been rife in the village. Now something seen had been added to a word heard, imagination had spiced the dish, handling had enlarged it. Popular surmise already suspected actual guilt.

Stephen and Melissa were together every day. She went to choir rehearsal and sat and stood beside him. She came often to the farm and stayed there days

together. While Amory painted, she took long walks through woods and fields, coming at last on Stephen, expectant but surprised. Every week, Stephen went to the little town house for Melissa to accompany his songs.

The first killing frost was late that year. For the last two weeks of October, a cold rain fell continuously. The creeks were swollen beyond precedent, and alarm was felt for the bridges, ugly wooden structures with flimsy iron rails. Then on the first Saturday of November came the cloudburst and the disastrous flood.

That afternoon Melissa started out under a lowering sky to walk up to Beechwood for supper. It looked, she thought, as if she might get a wetting, but that she never minded, piously thanking Heaven for the natural wave of her hair. At the first turn in the village street she caught sight of the Boone Hill rising in the northwest and saw it suddenly blotted out by a prodigious cloud. Immediately the rain fell on its slopes like a solid wall of water. It was like a host of gray warriors descending on the village below. She gazed in wonder. Never had she seen such a torrent of rain. Not a drop had fallen when she crossed the first bridge and she calculated that the downpour would be another five minutes in reaching her. In less than that time she had sought refuge on the piazza of a vacant house. There was something terrifying in the sky and that

impenetrable wall of rain advancing. It was quite dark. A rabbit ran from under the porch where Melissa had tarried and came up beside her. Then came a strong wind speaking persuasively to the great maples which bowed submissively. It heralded the coming of the cloudburst, and before that oppressive wonder, her heart was abased, bowing as had the trees of the wood.

The rain continued for two hours. Long before it had ceased people were hurrying eagerly toward the central bridge. With them went Melissa, intensely stimulated by the excitement, eager to have the bridge destroyed. On the opposite side she saw Amory. He waved to her with evident relief. 'How dull he is to live with!' she thought angrily. She hoped more than ever that the bridge would go and separate them at least for a few days.

Every moment the swirling brown waters rose higher as the torrents rushed down from the hill creeks. A low 'A — ah!' increasing in volume to a shout, rose from the watchers as a great willow was cruelly uprooted from its life's home, tilted on the bank, snatched off again by the mocking water, and sent careening down the muddy stream. A second shout announced the parting of the bridge. Unwilling and slow, it was wrenched from its supports to wallow like a huge beast in the dirty water. Fifty feet down it struck against the corner of a barn which had been standing proudly aloof looking down at the

turbulent stream. The blow and the pressure of the flood staggered it. A great corner fell away revealing a heap of hay and by it the owner who had been peering out of the window at the riotous waters. There was something indecent and shocking in that sudden revelation of what had so innocently been concealed.

It occurred to Melissa that if the lower bridge went, she would be cut off as effectually from Beechwood as she was now from Amory. She slipped away from the crowd and walked rapidly down the street toward the bridge which crossed the stream below the knoll. Three times she had to jump great boughs of maple. Drops of water from the dripping branches fell cold upon her hot cheeks. She felt exultant. She broke into a run. She wanted to shout, to tell the bridge just to hold out until she got over. Breathlessly she thought of days, perhaps a week with Stephen in the stronghold on the hill, away from Amory's cynical eyes. How much the storm was like Stephen! It brought him vividly before her. For the first time she acknowledged to herself her longing. His arms! Well, once, perhaps! and ran the faster.

The bridge was still hidden by the willows which stood before it, three tall sisters, up to their knees in water. The road itself was two inches deep, but Melissa didn't stop for that. So intent was she that she had put a foot on the bridge before she saw Stephen on the opposite side. He had tied the Little

Mare to a tree at a safe distance and was critically inspecting the bridge.

'Stephen, Stephen!' she hailed breathlessly.

He rose. His anxious expression was instantly succeeded by one of poignant happiness which as quickly gave place to concern. He waved her back imperatively. 'Get back!' he cried. 'It's not safe! It's going! Get back, I say!' His voice rose like thunder over the roar of the flood, but Melissa gave no heed. She ran boldly on. Before she had taken half a dozen steps, there came a dreadful groaning, rending noise, and the bridge had parted from its supports. Melissa staggered, recovered, took a drunken step sidewards, clutched for the rail.

'Get in the middle!' he shouted in a voice to move armies. She obeyed, lurching wildly, but laughing and fearless.

Steadying itself, the bridge swept on about the bend of the creek toward the right by the long line of willows. Looking down its course, Melissa knew her craft would soon swerve into the pine wood. Could she make a landing there? It was a long way to the mill and certain destruction. However, she must think fast. She must do just as Stephen said. He was keeping pace with her, running along by the creek. His face was colorless, and as she looked at it she began to be afraid. Now the bridge was end to end across the stream so there were no rails to hinder her. 'Shall I jump, Stephen?' she quavered.

'Wait!' he commanded.

Melissa's terror mounted. It became agony. Her knees felt like water, but she kept her eyes on Stephen.

'Jump!' he cried in a great voice.

She pulled herself together and sprang toward him. He leaped and caught her. She was in his arms, his strength flowed over her, her head was on his breast. She clung to him. She put her arms about his neck. Yesterday he had desired to kiss the little blemish just below her curling hair. It had seemed to him that doing so would mark the height of bliss. To-day how insufficiently it nourished him! Their eyes met and in hers he read answering desire. She looked about. They were alone in the fragrant pine grove. She looked back at him and he read the meaning in her eyes. He bore her deeper into the wood.

CHAPTER XX

AUDREY PASSES

Diana fell into the habit of bringing her sewing to the hospital. Audrey's scrutiny was less wearing when her own hands were busy. She wondered what thoughts were passing behind Audrey's hollow eyes. She was afraid to let her imagination pry.

Really Audrey was not thinking a great deal. Her discomfort was never permitted to become acute, and the morphia, while leaving her mind clear as to what was actually taking place, did not permit retrospection. The comforts of the hospital lulled her into forgetfulness of the sordid years. All day long she was waiting. First came the nurse to raise her shades, ask how she had slept, and tell her about the weather. Her tray followed with the little excitement as to whether the egg would be scrambled or poached. After that she had her bath and rested, weak but happy, feeling as might a soul in Paradise lying among the lilies. Then came the doctor, then her dinner, Roger's visit, and late on most afternoons, Diana. Roger had brought her a little clock. Its name was amusingly Baby Ben. Watching it made the time less inchoate. As she waited, she was vaguely expectant of a grimmer visitor, but she was now past anxiety.

From her window she could see two huge chimneys, two small chimneys, and one tall chimney. Around their bases extended an iron parapet. Farther down were two tiers of windows, five in each. The four at the left had green blinds which were drawn down and green shutters which were open. The others were shutterless and had white casings. Beneath two of them was a small iron balcony. These windows were opened and shut, but try as she might Audrey could never catch a glimpse of the life which went on behind them; never so much as see the hand which lowered or raised them.

It made her smile once to think that Diana knew no more of her past years — nor Roger either for that matter — than she herself knew what went on in those houses opposite. Frequently a black shadow moved across a lower window. She was sure there was something quite human in that, but at length she traced it to a swaying poplar tree whose topmost branch came even with the parapet.

At first Roger brought her flowers, but she shook her head over them; her eyes filled with tears. Diana brought a little plant with better fortune. It had wide flat leaves woolly like mullein with light under parts, and the flowers were bell-shaped and looked like red velvet. It had reminded her of Letty, so wholesome and so pretty. It had four buds, and Audrey, watching each become a blossom, thought that when the last had withered she would have

finished with the little brown room, the narrow white bed, and her own wasted body.

Of her childhood and youth, of her impressions of people, of her scanty present experiences, Audrey chatted freely. Diana became convinced that, whatever awfulness Audrey had committed, she wasn't herself one bit wicked. She was somehow childlike and innocent. She had worn soiled garments, but she herself was clean. Diana could not understand this, but believed it. If she had done half the things of which she suspected Audrey, her soul would be black as ink. Little by little she grew to blame Roger for everything. If she had seen them together, if she had heard Audrey's bitter mocking tone and seen his tenderness, his patience, she might have thought differently.

Diana was not long in learning that she meant an immense deal to Audrey. The sick woman begged to be braced physically for her visits. She liked to watch Diana's slim, nervous hands busy at her embroidery. 'For the trousseau?' she asked once.

Diana flushed angrily. For the first time she condemned Audrey for lacking taste, but she answered gently, 'I never wear this color. It is for you, Audrey.'

Tears of weakness filled the invalid's eyes. 'You are so good to me, Diana. What friends we might have been!' she added wistfully.

Diana, who was chary of caresses, patted Audrey's

hand. Audrey's appreciation lighted a little fire of self-approval at which she warmed herself. She was not used to be so pleased with Diana. It startled her. She accused herself of smugness and began a motive hunt.

Then came sad days when Audrey was terribly restless, though unconscious of her pain. Roger was with her when she died. At first he felt nothing but profound relief. There had been fear that she might last out another week. Then he thought of Diana. He had not seen her for weeks. How kind she had been! More than kind! Noble! The rules of the hospital required the immediate removal of poor Audrey's body, and he felt it wise to wait now for Diana and consult her about arrangements. She came, and each looked with surprise at the change these few weeks had wrought. Diana had grown very thin, her eyes were big, her face patiently sad. Roger was weary in body and mind, but he had never looked kinder. He had arranged for a service in the chapel adjoining the hospital. Would Diana care to come? They two were the only mourners for Audrey; they came alone to hear the Burial of the Dead, and small as the tiny chapel was, it seemed to echo and reëcho with loneliness.

Diana wept to think that in all the world there was no one to be sorry Audrey was dead. By and by she and Roger would begin to be glad.

It was a bitter day of sleet, a dark, depressing day.

Roger would have gone alone over the cold and windy miles to the cemetery, but Diana could not endure it for him, so she rode with him, in all her grief amused at her action, hoping that no one would ever find out that she had gone alone with her fiancé to the funeral of his first wife. Now that she was dead and gone, Audrey seemed less her friend than Roger's wife.

They scarcely spoke on the long ride. In silence and in tears they saw Audrey's casket lowered and the sleet falling upon the roses which covered it. The journey back was harder still, for there was nothing now for which to keep up. Diana couldn't talk. A horrid cold had gripped her and she bitterly resented a physical disability coming on her so worn and weary mentally. Peremptorily she ordered Roger to leave her at the ferry.

He seemed to come out of a daze and asked hurriedly, 'How soon may I see you, Diana?'

She had been thinking of Roger for weeks as Audrey's husband. She had unconsciously blamed him for their catastrophic marriage. She was all at once convinced that he had never really loved any one else. He wanted his freedom. He should have it. She was sick to death of all this misery in which she had been involved through no fault of her own.

She spoke savagely. 'Don't come. I don't want to see you. I'm through.'

'Diana!' he exclaimed, amazed.

'I'll send you back your ring. I haven't been wearing it.' He made a motion to detain her. 'Don't keep me,' she persisted. 'I can't miss this boat,' and broke from him.

At first she was neither glad nor sorry for what she had done, but she was bitterly ashamed. She had been helpful and patient for many weeks, and then she had wiped out all the good she had done with unforgivable cruelty. She did not acknowledge her shame, but assured herself largely, 'If he wants me, he'll come after me fast enough. He's bold enough for anything.'

CHAPTER XXI

STEPHEN UNDERSTANDS MELISSA

As Melissa walked up the hill, one arm of Stephen's about her, his other leading the Little Mare snapping and showing her teeth viciously, she felt herself a different woman. For the first time she loved not Melissa, but another. As yet she had no regrets. She had never felt so good, so virtuous. It was beautiful to own this new dependence on Stephen. What a miracle was love! How sweet the stolen waters which they had drunk!

Stephen held his lofty head like a conqueror's. Her unlooked-for surrender transformed him into a hero in his own eyes. He sang lustily, a song new to him of a rustic Chloë and her lover.

Melissa chided him. Already she had begun to be afraid. When they reached the spot where the road dipped into the valley, they halted and looked into each other's eyes.

'What are we going to say?' he asked bluntly.

'Leave it to me,' was her brief answer. She had begun to feel chagrin over her surrender and wondered at it. The story she told the family at the farmhouse was in the main accurate and there was so much in it to amaze the Boones, with its details of bridges and barns wrecked, that she had to tell it over and over to

the Greek chorus of 'Well, I never's.' On the high ground the rain had done some damage, and there was water in the cellar for the first time in forty years, but nothing which led them to suspect the devastation in the valley.

Primrose had sat listening intently. 'What time did the bridges go?' she asked pointedly.

'No use to lie,' thought Melissa. 'Still, we were alone there.' — 'Five o'clock, I should say,' she answered, putting the time two hours later than the reality.

Primrose looked at Stephen and marked his hot flush. 'Then it's queer you didn't get over town and do your errands first,' she said slowly.

'The town bridge went out much earlier,' Melissa interposed. 'How could he get to the stores?'

'Sounds queer,' muttered Prim defiantly.

'Hush, Prim,' said her mother. 'People don't look at the clock when such things happen.' She had caught a glimpse of Letty's white face and wanted to quiet Prim at any cost. Melissa had seen it, too. She had known that Letty's reign would be brief, but she had never intended to dethrone her. She felt a twinge, but smothered it as she remembered the innocence of her intention.

Stephen went to the barn and Primrose followed, stalking him like Nemesis.

'You make me sick!' she said bitterly.

'Why?' he demanded angrily.

'Carrying on with that creature! You needn't expect me to mince words. Look how horrid she is to Amory! See how she cavorts with a married man! And when poor little Letty all but died having your baby, you can go right on breaking her heart. I'll never trust a man again. I'd rather die than marry Tom Peebles and have him turn out such a beast!' And she broke into tears of pity and disgust.

'Is Letty jealous?' asked Stephen curiously.

'If she's fool enough to care about a great empty-headed idiot like you, how can she *help* being jealous?' she asked hotly.

'She can divorce me then,' said Stephen, to his own surprise. 'She and Amory can both get divorces. Melissa and I are going to New York.'

Primrose was so afraid that she felt positively sick. Then she laughed scornfully. She knew Melissa too well to believe that story. What will you go on? The Little Mare? "O young Lochinvar has come out of the West"!' she chanted.

'Better drop that,' said Stephen quietly. She saw his hand had hold of the handle of a hatchet. The knuckles grasping it were dead white. She hadn't meant to goad him into murder.

A rush of pitiful affection overpowered her. She put out her hands to him. 'Oh, Stephen, I don't mean to be so cruel, but you poor boy, poor boy! Do you realize you haven't a penny but the little that's left of Letty's money?'

'I can work,' he said doggedly.

'Do you think Melissa will leave Amory and safety and respectability for such a chance as that? If you were a great operatic star, she might, but it'll be ten years before you can be that. She's ten years older than you. Do you think she'll take in washings to help you along? Letty would. Oh, Stephen,' she ended mournfully, 'what a poor fool you are!'

He sat down on the block from which he had lifted the hatchet. 'I'll have it out with her to-night. I'll know before I sleep where we all stand,' he said sombrely. He was shaken by her words. Prim had such common sense and he had always depended on her.

That night Melissa went early to her bed in the cubby-room. Stephen was still out in the barn where he must she thought be half frozen, for the air had grown bitterly cold after the storm. Exhausted in body but alert in mind, she lay on her feather bed rejoicing in its warmth. She thought Stephen would come straight to her when he entered the house. With exultation she remembered Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' and the lover who had awakened the maiden to share the feast he had spread. Poor Stephen, his feast would be nothing more, sooth, than doughnuts and cider. She laughed aloud as that fancy struck her. Then she was afraid she had been overheard. Some one might think Stephen was with her. Remembering in her solitude his passion and his youth, she became more and more frightened. It seemed to her she had

unchained a monster and couldn't control him. At last she heard him coming, his step heavy and determined. He opened her door without knocking and closed it too noisily. When he spoke his voice was lowered but too loud. Melissa sitting up in bed, the moonlight falling on her white face, with a sign implored silence.

'I've been out at the barn,' he said, unheeding. 'I've thought things out. I know you love me. I'm not such a fool as not to know you love me. We'll go away at once. I can get work. Amory and Letty can divorce us. It'll be fairer and the best way all around.'

'Be quiet, Stephen,' she said in a fierce, still voice. That checked him. He listened while she went on more gently: 'I've been thinking, too. We can do nothing until Amory decides to return to New York. I'll see that's very soon. I promise it shall be very soon. Then you shall follow us. Letty can stay with your people. Amory likes you. He has influence and you shall benefit by it. You'll get a church position at once. Before long you'll be known everywhere. Then I'll come to you and be yours openly just as I'm really all yours now, in secret.'

'You mean,' he asked, bewildered, 'that we should go on as if nothing had happened?'

'No, dear stupid. Everything has happened. We can't go back of that. If you'll be cautious, if you'll be guided by me, I'll show you — you shall eat your cake and have it, too.'

'You mean — I've got to get this straight — that you'll belong to me? That Amory'll provide for the both of us?'

Melissa could but sigh at his crudeness. She was silent, but it became necessary for her to speak, and she murmured, 'Only a temporary expedient.'

'I'll be damned if I'll do such a thing,' he retorted.

'Be quiet,' she said; 'be quiet or we'll both be damned fast enough.' In a still softer voice she went on, 'Stephen, dear Stephen, our whole position is irregular. We have to sacrifice something to it. Pride's the cheapest thing we can give up. If we went now, we'd starve. How about poor Letty and Amory? It's not very kind to break their hearts. What they're ignorant of can't hurt them. In a few years much will have happened' — her voice trailed off into silence.

'You're a bad woman, Melissa,' he said slowly. 'I see now the kind you are. I don't say it makes me love you less, but I see what a fool I was to worship you.'

'I give you all I have and you taunt me,' she answered bitterly.

'That's not it,' he said. 'I could have honored you all the more for that. I can't put it into words, but I guess it's pretty rotten to want to eat your cake and have it.'

'Don't you love me, Stephen?' she whispered.

He stooped over and crushed her in his arms, kiss-

ing her roughly. Then he rushed from the room and as he went Melissa heard him sob.

'I wonder why he didn't say all this downstairs so Uncle Lige and the old Boones could enjoy it all as Letty and Prim undoubtedly have!' she asked herself in dreary amusement.

During the weeks that followed, it seemed to Melissa that of them all she was the most to be pitied. Stephen was like a half-tamed bear, now crouching at her feet, now turning upon her with terrible bared fangs. Once he spat the name Circe at her and reviling said she had changed him from a man to a beast. With Letty he was rough; he was rude to Primrose and his mother. When they two were alone together, Melissa petted, coaxed, cajoled him. She had a thousand arts to conquer him. It amazed her to see how much she had learned; of what seductive graces she had all at once become mistress. Before others she was always coldly demure. No woman was ever better fitted for a clandestine affair and no man less. She was herself on the rack, and yet she took a strange pleasure in torturing Stephen by her changed front when others were about. Something within herself took delight in these changes; one instant the embodiment of austere virtue, the next a voluptuous woman in her lover's arms.

Yet with all her pains she could hardly believe the Boones deceived. She could only guess what went on behind the calm cynical face of her husband.

CHAPTER XXII

DIANA AND MELISSA

DIANA, who was wont to be crystal clear in her decisions, could not make up her mind how to spend her Christmas holiday. New York would be empty as far as she was concerned. All the teachers planned home visits. Strangely enough, Melissa and Amory lingered in the hill country; Roger might, for all she knew, be dead and buried. She had never missed a Christmas in Beechwood, but, when she had seen her home last, her hopes had been high, her eyes set eagerly on a shining road. She had made no explanation to her people of the changes in her plans. To her mother she had written briefly that she had broken her engagement. She knew that, however much her family might wonder, they would never question. None the less she dreaded their concerned looks and the added consideration which would be shown her. It seemed to her, too, that in returning to Beechwood she would be formally closing a door between her and Roger which hitherto she had left temptingly ajar. Thoughts of Melissa troubled her. She had lost one love and Melissa had been the winner. She could see the scornful wonder in her eyes over a woman twice defrauded.

At the last moment Beechwood called too loudly for her to disobey the summons. She packed hastily,

said good-bye to the flat already deserted by her companions, and was borne north and westward to the hills of the home country.

Her first feeling on reaching the farm was unselfish gladness that she had come. She had never been so welcomed. Unfeigned delight was on all their dear faces. Her father patted her shoulder awkwardly whenever he came near her. Primrose cried and clung to her, her mother kissed her weeping. Something struck Diana as strange in their unaccustomed demonstrations. It was not at all as if they were showing her sympathy. It seemed as if there was a dim appeal in their relief at seeing her again. They needed her. She was to straighten something out. Her keen eyes marked Letty's face, sadder than when she had lost her baby, and Stephen's set in brooding lines. It was late when she had arrived; supper was spread for her on the end of the kitchen table. It was done daintily since it was for Diana, on a pretty painted tray half covered with a fringed napkin. The family all came out to watch her eat. One and another drifted to the buttery and came back with doughnuts and cheese. Stephen brought up cider from the cellar. Every one talked and laughed, admired Diana's new clothes and pretended not to see that her magnificent solitaire was missing. Under all the chatter, Diana wonderingly felt the strain.

That night she slept with Primrose. The younger girl had built a fire in the ugly little airtight stove, so

the room was comfortable for slow undressing and talking. They gossiped cheerfully of many things. Diana thought it strange so much could be said without mentioning Audrey and Roger. Primrose did not even know Roger had been married.

They were in bed at last and Diana was glad of the feather bed which she usually condemned. Presently the mother came to the door. She had brought them two hot flatirons, wrapped in woollen cloths, to keep their feet warm. It was such a cold night for December, she said. She kissed each girl and clung a little to the elder.

Then the two girls were alone. Primrose threw her arms about Diana. 'Oh, Di, I do love you so!' she exclaimed tearfully.

'Precious little sister,' the older girl murmured. 'Tell me all about it, Primrose,' she commanded in a steady voice. 'Whatever is the trouble here? You act as if you were sleep-walking.'

'It's your terrible, wicked, artful Melissa,' Prim answered vindictively.

Diana started. She remembered her fleeting compunction over the visit. 'Tell me all about it,' she said quietly.

'He's just besotted over her. He can't see anything but her. He acts as if Letty and all the rest of us were dead and she the only thing alive in all the world. And he's terrible. He's ugly. He's sullen. He's morose. He's all the bad words you can think of. Oh,

Diana, we used to be so happy and now we're perfectly miserable, and it's all because of your bad Melissa!'

'Does she love him?' Diana asked incredulously.

'As much as she can love anybody except her hateful, beautiful self.'

'Are you sure?'

'He wanted her to run away with him and she won't.'

'Perhaps it's all on his side,' Diana hazarded.

Primrose vehemently rejected the idea.

'No, no, no!' she said. 'Listen, Diana. Of course I haven't told any one else. Last week when I was coming home from school, I couldn't bear to go to the house. It's so dreadful here lately, Diana, so I thought I'd walk up in the beech wood. I'd just gone up the path a little way and I looked off to the right and there was a tree Stephen had cut down and he was sitting on it beside her. His head was hanging down and his hands were on his knees. I couldn't see his face, but, oh, Di! he looked so dejected. He looked so beaten! And, Diana, she was kissing him over and over again, and he wasn't looking at her and never seemed to notice. All at once he just turned on her and put his arms around her, and it was so dreadful, Di, I had to run away. They never knew I saw them,' she ended simply.

'I will go and see Melissa,' Diana answered in a hard tone.

'That's it, Diana; I knew you'd do something. You're so clever,' the younger girl answered in relief.

'Don't have too much confidence in me,' Diana objected. 'I've only one argument I'm sure of. She does hate scandal so. She wants every one to think well of her. It's my fault for bringing her here,' she ended wearily.

True to her promise, Diana went next day to visit Melissa. Primrose drove her down and offered with unusual timidity to accompany her on the interview, but to her relief she was despatched on various errands with orders to meet her in a half-hour at the post office. So much time Diana deemed sufficient to exhaust her powers against the foe.

That foe she found already prostrate. Melissa was lying on the horsehair sofa in the austere little parlor. She was cold and wretchedly ill and made no attempt to rise when young Phalinda ushered in Diana. Something in Diana's face, perhaps only in the girl's omitting the old kiss of greeting, determined Melissa to have no eavesdropper.

'You may run along now, Phalinda,' she said. 'I shan't need you before five.'

The two women exchanged desultory remarks until the door closed behind the little maid.

'She will go out the front way,' Melissa commented wearily. 'I've never dared tell her she shouldn't.'

Diana did not answer. She had loosened her coat in the warm room and thoughtlessly drawn off her

heavy gloves. She sat facing Melissa on the edge of a slippery, horsehair-covered chair. She looked very pretty with her bright cheeks and purposeful dark eyes. Her lips were firmly set.

Melissa saw that she was already convicted and heartily hated her judge.

'I've heard some horrid talk about you and Stephen,' Diana began desperately.

'Indeed?' questioned Melissa, raising her eyebrows.

Diana was silent, but her anger grew hot within her. 'You look like the cat that swallowed the canary,' she said at last.

Melissa said nothing, but continued her cold regard. As of old, Diana broke before her.

'When you took Amory away from me I forgave you ——' she began bitterly.

'And now some one has taken Roger?' asked Melissa, glancing at Diana's bare hand.

Diana flushed furiously. 'You could not take him from me,' she said passionately. 'He would have known you for what you are. I knew a bad woman once, but she was a saint beside you.'

This was terrible. She was acting like a shrew. In another minute she might fall upon Melissa, belabor her like a fishwife, tear off that hateful, sneering smile. She rose, walked to the window and stared unseeingly through the tiny panes of waving glass. When she had put the curb on her emotions, she

walked back to her chair. She spoke in a new voice, firm and passionless. 'What are you going to do about it, Melissa? Do you mean to break up Beechwood? You won't get much out of it. Stephen will never be happy. He'll feel too wicked for that. He's penniless. It will be years before he could support you. It's not likely he could ever have a career if you broke his spirit at the start.'

Melissa was thinking rapidly. In a flash of comprehension she acknowledged to herself that she knew the meaning of her illness. It was not her eyes. It was all nonsense to pretend to herself. Certainly she had no idea of flying to Stephen. She must at all costs get rid of him and become reconciled with Amory. No one, not even Stephen, must know this baby was not Amory's. It was something to see the path before her. It might be difficult, but it lay plain to her sight.

She fixed her eyes on Diana. 'You are talking a great deal of nonsense, Diana,' she said coldly. 'One would think you knew me too well to listen to such cruel gossip. Your brother has been perfectly foolish about me. It ought to be enough for you to know that my age and my own marriage to a *gentleman* would keep me out of an entanglement with him, especially when he's married to that good little neglected wife of his. If you can keep Stephen away, you'll be doing me the greatest favor in the world. Especially now, for I'm not feeling well.' She sat up

at that and looked at Diana with her old gracious smile. 'You've been so harsh and so bitter that you don't deserve to hear my news.' She paused. Her eyes looked straight into the candid face of Diana. 'Amory and I are going to have a little one, Diana. It's a secret and you mustn't tell a soul. Promise!'

Diana promised. She went away bewildered.

'I am a wicked woman,' she said to herself. 'Either that, or just a sensible one. I do believe she's going to have a baby, and I don't believe Amory had a thing to do with it.'

That night Melissa made her first tentative effort at reconciliation with Amory. She did so, much as an ivy sends out tendrils, but she was not fitted to be a vine and Amory's surface was like a mountain of glass; it was too smooth, too unbroken, to allow this clinging. As the days advanced, she redoubled her pains, for she was now in terror day and night of losing what was dearest to her. As if her heart had perceived an error, she withdrew herself from Stephen, resolutely refused him her favor, saw as little as she could of him. This course had danger, for it maddened him and she feared his betrayal. Still it had to be done, and though she was grieved for him she had a savage pleasure in his pain. She sat down before Amory as a general to conduct the siege of a walled town. It had been easy to take him from Diana; it had been nothing for her to woo Stephen. Rather she had herself been the walled town, entrenched fair and prosperous

in her loveliness. How difficult was the present business!

Her condition made her sleepy so that, going early to bed, she would fall quickly into slumber. Then after an hour or two her wakeful and tortured mind would lay cold fingers on her eyelids, prying them awake. There she would lie for hours, evolving plans only to reject them. If Amory found out the truth, she could only expect that he would repudiate her, cast her out. Where then could she go? Of what use could this penniless boy be to her? Her mother was dead. One brother lived, owning the home farm. He had married a pretty, dark-haired, thick-lipped country girl. Melissa had seen her two years ago, not pretty then, a slattern with a front tooth missing and two bedraggled children. Her dislike had made Melissa coldly venomous. How that brother's wife would rejoice to see that honey-colored head brought low!

One night she rose from her bed, and going halfway down the stairs looked into the parlor where Amory still read by the green-shaded student's lamp. A terrible impulse toward resolving her doubts assailed her, but she dared not go down wild-eyed, half distracted with fear. She sat down on the step until she could get herself in hand. Amory, hearing a stir, called.

'Is that you, Melissa?'

Her voice would not come. He rose and came to the foot of the stairs, looking solicitously up at her.

'Are you ill?' he asked. The pity in his voice shook her.

'I'm thirsty,' she managed to say; 'please get me a glass of water.' She went back to bed and, when he had said good-night and gone down, she cried and cried and cried.

One evening of the next week she sat alone with her husband. He was reading. She recognized the familiar green cover. It was of an anthology of Victorian verse. In it he would sit engrossed evening after evening. They had not been able to bring many books with them, but Amory seemed not to mind going over and over old favorites. On her lap lay a woman's magazine. She had been idly conning a page of embroidery, but could not fix on it her attention. Her beautiful poise had deserted her; her hitherto unfailing calm threatened to depart; she clutched at its skirts imploring them to cover her.

'Listen to this, Melissa,' he said. He knew poetry bored her, yet in his enthusiasm was always thinking that this one gem would surely have power to move her.

'Isn't this fine? I've read it over repeatedly. I've long known it by heart, but every time I think of it, I like it better.'

> "I strove with none, for none was worth my strife;
> Nature I lov'd, and, next to Nature, Art;
> I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
> It sinks, and I am ready to depart."

Melissa shuddered. She wanted to warm herself longer. She was far from ready to depart. She said nothing, and presently Amory spoke in a changed tone of bed.

'I'm tired,' said he. 'I took a long tramp to-day, up into the beech wood and down again and my easel is a burden when the snow is so deep. I need a boy to bear it for me as if it were a harp and I a wandering minstrel. That wouldn't be nearly so respectable a profession, would it, Melissa? Aren't you glad I don't carry a hand organ?'

'Did you have dinner at the farm?' she asked, disregarding his nonsense.

He shook his head. 'To tell you the truth, I think the Boones have seen too much of us, Melissa. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll say good-night.'

She pulled herself together with a visible effort. 'You are often tired, Amory,' she said regretfully.

The words were trifling, but the tone made Amory regard her keenly. Her eyes fell, but she knew she must make a final effort and in it she must succeed. She looked at him again and gave him her old heart-moving smile. She rose and walked over to him. With a gesture she prevented him from rising and, drawing up a hassock, placed herself at his feet. He drew back slightly, but the physical movement was nothing to the spiritual withdrawal she felt take place within him. She could feel his soul retreating, throwing up innumerable strong walls against her. She was

a desperate woman; all that she valued in the world — and beyond that she recognized no values — depended on her taking the citadel. Over his thin nervous fingers she laid her large white hand. Amory's fluttered beneath, betraying his unconquerable agitation. If she could but believe she had moved him to tenderness, her siege was already won.

'Couldn't we try once more?' she whispered gently.

He looked uncompromisingly down at her.

'Try what? and why?' he asked.

She faltered, then spoke rapidly in a faint voice: 'Dear Amory, I have been so unhappy lately. We have been so long estranged. We have both been so proud and foolish and it has made us both so wretched. And now this poor boy fancies himself in love with me. I have been so lonely, you know yourself, so neglected, that I could almost have fancied I loved him, too. You have been so indifferent. It's so natural for me to like being loved.'

He was still silent and his pale blue eyes regarded her so steadily that she felt as if her own were twin butterflies impaled by them.

With an heroic effort she leaned forward, put her arms about him, let her perfumed hair brush his lips. She held him closely embraced while her heart turned sick as she discerned the repugnance of his own. At last he was quite still and she thought he had yielded. She held him a long time and then murmured, 'I'm

going up now, but I'm not saying good-night, dear, dear Amory.'

Then he spoke in a cold, detached voice.

'This has been very painful for you, I imagine, Melissa?'

Her arms dropped. She started up. In her horror she had left him, she had crossed the room, before she could force herself to turn back and face him. Her failure had ravaged her face. It was distorted before his eyes into a tragic mask. Almost as terrible to bear as the threatened punishment was the self-loathing which consumed her at having exerted every effort in a vile endeavor and then failed.

'Sit down, Melissa,' he said, pointing to her old chair. 'Let us be sensible.'

Trembling she took her seat and waited for him to begin. At last he spoke, and his voice was not unkind. 'I know you so well, Melissa. These past weeks, when you've been so attentive, so uncommonly affectionate, when I know how distasteful I am to you — I can't help, with my knowledge of your nature, feeling certain you wouldn't make any unpleasant efforts without the strongest possible reasons. It's been quite evident that you've gone farther than you intended in this affair. You're badly scared. You want me to help you out.'

She did not answer. She did not meet his eyes, but felt his inexorable regard. 'Be honest,' he advised.

She nodded. 'There is some truth in what you say,' she answered with difficulty.

'Do you love him?' he asked.

'What is love?' she parried bitterly. He was silent. 'I love him,' she said defiantly.

'Why not run off with him?'

She could not speak, but shook her head.

'Is it money? Or your age? Or because you are afraid of becoming disreputable? Or all?'

She nodded miserably. Something strange was happening to her. Deeps which she had not believed could be violated had been revealed. A secret had been wrested from her, was being inspected, looked at from all angles, talked about. Along with the pain, she felt a strange relief. She hugged it to her along with the anguish. Did Amory then know all? Let him have it then! It seemed to her as if her heart had been taken out of her body. They were holding it in their hands. They were squeezing out drops of blood from it. She looked straight at Amory. 'I'm going to have a child,' she said in a firm, loud voice.

He whistled. He had not expected that. 'I beg your pardon,' he said formally.

They were silent a long time. Melissa began to regret her confidence. She might have kept the secret longer. Something might have happened which would have made it unnecessary for her to tell it. She might with more patience have won Amory over.

At last Amory spoke. To her surprise his voice had

a new respect. 'Let me congratulate you, Melissa. At last you've experienced a genuine emotion. You've told the truth, too. You're coming on.'

The words were bitter, but the tone was not. It occurred to Melissa that Amory had long believed she was bad enough for anything. He was only surprised in her having been brave enough to confess.

'Why on earth don't you want a divorce?' he asked.

That loosened her tongue. 'Oh, Amory,' she said reproachfully, 'I'm older than he. We haven't a penny. Think of the burden I'd be on him! It would make him hate me. He'd never be happy. He'd come to despise me more than you do. And think, Amory, of his poor people. Aren't you sorry for Letty? You mayn't care what becomes of me ——'

'What do you want then?' he interrupted her. 'Be frank. You know well enough you don't care a damn for Letty.'

'I want to keep on as we're doing,' she answered with a hardihood she did not feel. 'I've stopped seeing Stephen. It's all over between us.'

'It's absurd for me to countenance you,' he said gloomily. 'Still it's not as if I should ever feel any desire to try marriage again. In a way, I suppose I have a responsibility for you. Stephen isn't capable of bearing it. And this poor wretched scrap of humanity you're foisting on the world! Some compassion's needed there, and you and Stephen aren't likely to

have any to spare. I dare say he doesn't even know?' he inquired.

Melissa shook her head. 'I don't see why he need ever know.'

'Heavens, Melissa!' he exclaimed disgustedly. 'No use to rail at you,' he went on, 'you can't understand. But Stephen must know. We must get back at once to New York.' To his surprise, she vehemently opposed him. She begged him piteously to stay on where they were. He spoke more sternly than he had done as yet. 'So you can continue this amour? Never! If I condone the past, I've done as much as any decent man can do. I make no such agreement for the future. You're to see no more of him than of Uncle Lige or old Jaffrey, and that shall be as little as is consistent without appearing to break with them. Complacency has its limits.'

'It's not to see him,' she told him, weeping. 'It's not for his sake. It's as if there were a play I'd been in, a tragic, dreadful play. I've been the leading lady, and I can't leave now before the last act begins.'

'You'll be no leading lady now,' he assured her grimly. 'You're off the boards. Continue to tell the truth. You were doing it so beautifully. You know that's not your reason.'

'Believe then that I can't endure leaving Stephen. I don't ask to see him. Just to be near him, and something might happen ——'

He laughed. 'Letty may die and I may die and

leave you all my money! Delightful fancies! Oh, Melissa, to be a fool is worse than all the rest! Would Destiny show you such signal favor? Against us she delights to work marvels, but who ever knew her to be kind?'

'Don't mock me. Only let me stay. I'll just be a ghost peering out at the live people.'

'Two ghosts,' he said with a relenting sadness.

She looked at him with a new interest. It appeared that, the secret out, there was room in its place for another emotion — even for an interest in him with whom she shared it. 'Have I broken your heart, Amory?' she asked him with a sorrowful smile.

'Not now, not all at once,' he told her in his old whimsical way.

CHAPTER XXIII

NEMESIS

One cold afternoon in early February, Stephen was sawing wood at the foot of the steep path which led up to Diana's Bath. It happened that he was at work on the log where he had sat with Melissa on that afternoon when Primrose had seen them and had fled from the sight in bewildered terror. He was thinking of it now, and the thought of her kisses renewed his passion and afterward his shame. As he bent to his task, it seemed to him that like Christian his sin was bound into a burden on his back. 'It never will drop off,' thought he despondently, 'unless Melissa is really tired of me and means to be rid of me. That won't help my conscience any. I've been a slave, and, whether or not she sets me free, a slave I'll be with all the cringing, sneaking ways of one. It's queer there isn't any happiness in sin. Uncle Lige says we're all weak, "failable" creatures, but surely no one ever got less satisfaction out of "failability" than I do.'

At this stage of his reflections, that sense which assures us of another's presence made him look up startled. He perceived no one and was about to resume his task when in the act of stooping he caught

sight of Diana's Bath from a new angle. Amory was crouching within glaring down at him with a face as frozen as the spring. His hands grasped a boulder which he had apparently pried loose from the rude masonry. Stephen knew that Amory was about to hurl it at him. Instinctively he made ready to dodge. Then he straightened as if to welcome the missile, for he felt so utterly desolate that he could have kissed the hands which despatched it. Immediately it occurred to him that it would be a dreadful thing for Amory to kill him; he would be a murderer; he would suffer a shameful death in the electric chair; it would be terrible for both families; no! it would serve Melissa right. All these changes of front having been little short of instantaneous, he now held up both hands calling out cheerily, 'I surrender! Don't shoot!'

'Not to put you out of your misery? You're pretty miserable, you know.' Beneath Amory's ironical tone, Stephen fancied a current of sympathy. It was like balm to a horrid wound. After all, Amory was the only one who could understand Melissa and could therefore gauge his temptation and his sin. If a judge, Amory could but concede these extenuating circumstances.

'Come up,' said Amory; 'I wasn't really going to bash you. It might be a good thing for you, but it would be too hard on the rest of us. You don't really deserve to have so much done for you.'

Stephen went slowly up the path and seated himself on the rim of the spring. Amory was crouched within so that his head came below Stephen's shoulder. Beneath the black astrakhan cap which he affected straggled locks of his fine, fair hair which he could never remember to keep properly trimmed. Today his large eyes looked as light as the blue ice within the spring. There was a wildness in their glare which made the thought of Amory's meditating violence recur to Stephen, and again he resolved to offer no resistance. Amory might have a pistol concealed. He might plan to attack him unawares. Amory's puny strength matched against his own gigantic frame might be ludicrous, but it seemed to Stephen that Amory was stronger since his hands were clean. His was 'the sword of the Lord and of Gideon.' He looked straight before him, catching glimpses through the leafless trees of the farmhouse far below. His resolutely averted gaze prevented him from seeing the blue eyes soften.

'You look,' said Amory quietly, 'like a man with his feet in the stocks.'

Stephen instantly recalled a small woodcut in his United States history. There was the unlucky culprit ignominiously fastened as if he had been a wild animal, offering an unwilling target for the missiles of scorn and spite. He groaned and, turning to Amory, spoke with a piteous craving for understanding. 'I'm powerless. It's being so weak that kills me. Picked

up and put down like a puppy, by the scruff of its neck.'

Amory nodded. He had been picked up when he was almost ready to crouch at Diana's feet. It had not taken Melissa long to drop him. But he had not fawned upon her. He was stronger than this unhappy boy.

'Don't expect ever to be picked up again,' he warned. 'Your day is over.'

Stephen looked at him inquiringly. He was wondering if Amory had made Melissa give him up. The thought that she had not done so of her own will comforted him.

'Melissa is about to become a mother,' said Amory, and gave him time to recover.

With a shout, Stephen leaped to his feet. He looked wildly down at Amory, and the older man thought of an elephant trumpeting before his charge. He gazed steadfastly back at him. Stephen's face changed. He saw that Amory was not making sport of him. He sat wearily down and waited for him to continue.

'I suggested to her that she join forces openly with you. I was prepared to be liberal. But she is conventional by nature. It is pathetic to see her bewilderment over life's cruelty in presenting her such a dilemma. She feels that remaining with me is the lesser evil. Naturally, that means that your affair is over. It is her wish as well as mine. I dislike being dictatorial, but that's final.'

'I begged and implored her to leave you. It was never my intention to deceive you,' said Stephen in a tortured voice.

Amory spoke more kindly. 'She told me. You've only now to play a passive part. She's through with you. Accept it. After a while, you'll suffer less; then, not at all.' He paused, and when he went on it was in a lower tone as if he mused and spoke rather to himself than to his companion.

'I'm not sure but Melissa is a better woman for having had an affection of sorts for some one besides herself. All she ever was to me was a gilded figure-head. Marriage hasn't meant much to me. Friendship promised more. I rather fancied having you for a friend, Stephen. It seemed to me that you might be as bold and candid as your sister. I was mistaken. It's probable you will arrive at a certain greatness, but not, I think, to strength. It's cold here. Shall we say good-bye?'

He climbed out of the frozen bath, fragile, small, crippled, but in Stephen's eyes not only his master but Melissa's. Amory shrugged and shook himself free of the clinging snow. He looked back once at Stephen. 'Good-bye!' he called in a not unkindly voice. The boy did not answer. He sat with his hands on his knees, his shoulders hunched, his handsome head bowed.

Amory went down through the beech wood whistling. The whistle slightly off key penetrated Ste-

phen's consciousness where words had been powerless. He looked curiously after the slight figure limping along the uneven path. 'When a fellow can't sing, maybe making any kind of noise helps him,' he thought. For a long time he himself had been too unhappy to sing. A few moments he spent in pitying Amory. In a way he envied him. Not because he possessed Melissa. He understood that Amory had no joy in that; no more than a man feels in a gangrened limb — but because Amory was so strong, stronger than either he or Melissa. But that didn't mean he didn't suffer all the more for that.

His own misery soon reëngrossed him. His heart was as bleak as this wintry weather which whispered of a coming storm. A heavy sense of guilt oppressed him. He was not only accountable, he felt, to Amory and to Letty, but to a circle, starting with his own people and widening ever larger leaving him at its centre an outcast to all society. The worst of all was that he was estranged from God. He drew a momentary relief from thinking that now this affair was at an end he could pray again, but he concluded that God wouldn't be flattered at having him return to his allegiance just because some one else refused to let him have Melissa. He had often tried to pray, but, while his voice had called loudly on God to deliver him from temptation, his desires had thundered deafeningly so that he thought God like him must have heard only the baser petition. The pattern of his

thoughts was woven of so dull a fabric that he spurned himself for not feeling more acutely his misery and sin. There seemed no help for him. He sat there while the afternoon sun sank in a sky of crimson and mauve followed by the purplish gray clouds of the brief winter twilight. The faint violet which succeeded made him think of Letty's closed eyelids when she had lain so patient and so ill. He groaned aloud. Habit roused him at last and he walked heavily home, wishing he could bear to whistle as Amory had done.

It was late when he reached the house and, instead of going first to the barn he went straight to the back stoop and the kitchen. He was greeted by the warmth from the cook stove, the smell of potatoes frying cosily with onions, the ruddy lights and shadows on the rafters. His mother's wide figure bustled contentedly about. At one end of the table, Letty was paring a great pan of apples for sauce. At the other was Primrose frowning over a letter to Tom Peebles, much disturbed by questions and comments from Uncle Lige. That old worthy sat with his feet on the hearth exceedingly in the way of Mrs. Boone, who couldn't bear to disturb him. Besides, Uncle Lige was being of some use in the world. He was holding the black cat, Nehemiah, son to Letty's Daphne Gray. Nehemiah was an affectionate beast and if left to himself kept rubbing against her, threatening to trip her at every turn. The whole

place was so good, so wholesome that, after Stephen's recurring pang over the thought that he had been the serpent through whom sin had entered here, he could not but feel happier at being with them. He didn't dare touch Letty, who was nearest him, but he tweaked Prim's hair and hugged his mother, sure of a welcome there.

They were seated at the supper table when Mrs. Boone looked anxiously about. 'Where's father, Stephen?' she asked. 'I rang the bell half an hour ago.'

'He'll be in in a minute,' Stephen answered easily. He was hungry and the supper tasted as good as it had smelled. Letty rose and slipped out of the room.

'She's gone out to the barn so's to walk in with your father,' commented Mrs. Boone. 'She sets great store by him, and I declare she's more thoughtful than his own children,' she ended reproachfully.

Letty had stopped in the kitchen to take a little pink 'fascinator' from a nail behind the door. With that over her head she ran out into the cold. In the darkness she could see a deeper shadow near the barn door. 'Burlap sacks,' she said to herself. 'If there are potatoes in them, they'll freeze.' Then she knew they weren't potatoes and it was her heart that was freezing. She ran to the heap and stooped over to make sure. She called, 'Stephen! Stephen!' She didn't want to leave him alone out here, this good old

man who was all the father she'd ever known. Presently the kitchen door opened and Stephen stood filling the space, the light streaming through the chinks about him.

'Letty! Letty! Did you call?' he hailed her uncertainly.

'Hurry! Hurry!' she urged, though she knew there was no need for haste.

He ran down to her and stooped breathless over the heap. 'Go send Uncle Lige,' he commanded, 'and you, Letty, you'll have to tell mother.'

Letty ran as fast as she could to the house as if haste in dealing the blow would make it hurt less. In the dining-room door she paused trying to get her breath and find words. She needed none. Mother Boone read the evil tidings in her shocked face. She rose from the table, asking urgently, 'Where is he?' Letty's hand went to her throat as if to unloose the words imprisoned there.

'I'll get the bed ready. Uncle Lige, you go help Stephen.'

'Mother doesn't know he's dead,' thought Letty. She spoke blunt words as softly as if she stood in the world of shadows which had engulfed old Jaffrey. 'He's dead,' she whispered faintly.

Mother Boone looked uncertainly at her. 'Well, the bed must be got ready,' she said fussily and went out.

Primrose and Letty looked helplessly at each

other. Then Prim said briskly through her tears, 'You help her, Letty. I'll help the menfolks.'

It was a strange night filled with suspense, though there was no reason for that now that the sword had fallen. Stephen had to see the undertaker and despatch telegrams, so he was to stop and tell the doctor and the minister. Grace and Diana were to be sent for, but Jaffrey was too far away to come. It did not occur to them to send a cable.

CHAPTER XXIV

ROGER'S CUE

When Diana received her telegram, she felt that she had touched the foot of the declivity down which she had been slipping since Audrey had come into her life. She had had no word from Roger, and had constantly before her his face at the ferry with its look of hurt pride, resentment, mounting anger. A younger girl might, she thought, have made advances, but years had made her own heart obstinate. She knew that Roger felt she had deserted him and surmised that he had for her some of the resentment Audrey had of old inspired. She wanted him every minute; her work was now drudgery; her flat no longer a home, but an inn of restless sojourning. She was irritable, nervous, and all the time waiting the olive branch which was never extended.

And now she had lost her father whom she loved with an affection not unlike what she felt for the farm itself. He was rocklike, immovable. Time's changes had been so gradual as to be imperceptible. His wordlessness was akin to the brooding silences of Nature.

As she packed, it seemed to her that she could not bear to go without seeing Roger. In the presence of this bereavement her pride struck her as childish. She went to the telephone and tremblingly waited

the connection. Roger did not answer, but Diana having plunged did not care how far above her head the waters met. She begged the girl at the switchboard to give him a message. She entreated her, she pleaded with her not to forget. 'Please, please be sure. "My father has died suddenly, I need you. Diana."'

Turning away, she remembered how much more private would have been a note delivered by a messenger boy. However, she wasn't sorry. Her courage might not have held out. Now, if Roger stayed aloof, she had done all that she could.

She did not go aboard the train until the last minute, for she hoped he might reach the station in time to see her. She had, at last, to leave without sight of him, and, as she was borne away, she chided herself for heartlessness because, though she wanted to put all her heart on Beechwood's tragedy, she could not help some grief over the added miles piling themselves between her and Roger.

She might long ago have had him back if she had expressed a need of him. Diana's father, in his last involuntary act of death, had bequeathed her Roger, his to give because he belonged to those who needed him. If he had received Audrey in a transport of tenderness, how much more willingly did he open his heart to Diana, his darling! If he had frozen to ice in his anger, the warm rain of her need melted him, brought the thaw of spring.

It was a necessity to him to be active and energetic. He looked up trains, pulled down his bag from the closet shelf and packed it, though he knew he couldn't leave until next evening. He rejected the idea of a telegram. It would be unlikely to reach her in that remote hill country. It would be pleasant to surprise her. With no further preparation to make, he sat down to write Diana a letter. It was not intended for her eyes or ears. Even to her he could not confide certain beautiful thoughts which filled so easily the white sheets of paper. His shyness was ultimate, but he took pleasure in his writing, in the ecstatic phraseology of the lover. He read it over approvingly and then burned it, wishing heartily that other lovers would have like good sense, thereby relieving the public prints in divorce and breach-of-promise suits.

The long journey did not weary him, for he had no doubt of their meeting. She needed him. That was enough. His need was to be needed by her. Diana's lover had known happiness. Diana's husband! O peaceful stream gliding under green and golden beeches! O quiet flow of deep water after icy and precipitous falls! With what patience would he enfold her! With what large calm! All through the night the raucous grinding of the brakes, the fearful rush of iron monsters careening by full tilt, left him after the awakening panic wide-eyed to think rapturously of Diana, of her love, of her need of him until unwit-

tingly his eyes closed again and his dreams grew deeper.

Alighting at the little station, mundane cares again engrossed him. Neither man nor beast was in waiting, and he realized with annoyance that he should have wired for a conveyance. A walk of eight miles meant a long time before he could see Diana. Needs must, and he stepped smartly out.

Grace with her family had reached the farm at noon. It was the children's first experience of death, and in the midst of her grief and in the hurry of her preparations she had not been too busy to explain with tenderness the little she understood of the great mystery. Grandpa was now in heaven, she told them. Her tears were not for him who was now very happy. They were because she would miss him, and because grandma would be so lonely. All that was left was a tired body which could not see, nor feel, nor hear, but, for the sake of the one who had worn it, it would be laid away with flowers and songs.

Margaret, shedding ready tears, really didn't believe a word of it. The farm was grandpa and grandma. Without them there couldn't be a farm. But there was a farm, for they were all going to it. So grandpa must be there. The surface of her mind accepted her mother's words with docility, but the depths were unmoved. The journey's excitement, her mother's depression, her father's preoccupation conspired to exhaust her before she reached the farm.

There the grandmother in her black silk, the sad faces of Aunt Letty and Auntie Prim convinced Margaret's heart of what she hadn't before been able to believe; grandpa was really away, grandpa was dead. Behind the forbidden parlor door lay grandpa's body. Curiosity impelled her to enter. Did grandpa look like grandpa now that the real part was in heaven? She was afraid to look, but fear thrust her forward. Taking advantage of a moment when she was alone in the sitting-room, she stole to the door, turned the knob, advanced a little into the icy parlor.

Poor Margaret! She slipped out trembling, chilled to the heart. Incautiously, she left the door ajar; she always left a clue to her small crimes. She drifted uneasily to the kitchen. There was no one there. She took grandma's gray shawl from the black rocker with turkey-red cushions, wrapped it about herself and went out into the cold, a forlorn little figure. Her reasons though vague were many. She wanted to punish herself, to escape from horror, she longed to be missed, pursued, forgiven, and loved. Her dramatic sense told her that to run effectively she must run far, so with her poor little head confused by conflicting emotions, she had hurried a good mile down the hill before she came upon a new catastrophe. Unused to the narrow country road, she had been scurrying through the snow which edged it. In places the crust held firm beneath her, but often her little feet broke through and she went in above her knees

in the snow which struck cold through her ribbed cotton stockings. At last came a slip which was deep, deep — down to China, she thought. Trying to get out hurt her foot too dreadfully. She didn't dare move again for fear of a second horrible twinge, but cowered there, one leg bent under, the other beneath the treacherous snow down in some poor chipmunk's hole. To Roger striding up the hill, she looked like some queer bird; her drab shawl, clutched below her chin by mittenless hands, fell about her on the snow like monstrous plumage.

A man walking and carrying a bag meant a tramp to Margaret. She viewed Roger's approach with terror and prayed with fervor unaware that her petition was audible. 'O God, deliver us from tramps,' she entreated. Roger gave a mighty laugh, checking it abruptly lest he frighten her more. The child lifted her gaze from the damning bag to the blue eyes in which sparkled twinkling elves. They reassured her. 'I thought you were a tramp, but I see I was mistaken,' she explained gravely. 'I'm running away from grandpa,' she confessed, not without a shudder. 'I hadn't ought to have gone in there, but I snooped. Now I've run my foot into a hole. Oh, do you suppose it's a serpent's?' she asked, shuddering as this agonizing thought occurred.

He stooped and lifted her out carefully. She gave a cry, but confessed he hadn't hurt. However, she was sure she couldn't walk. Roger decided on leaving

his bag, thinking it would probably be safe on this wilderness way and started bravely on, Margaret in his arms.

Her mind was still on Death. 'It's terrible, you know,' she said aloud.

He gave her a little hug. 'It's not really grandpa, darling.'

'Looks more like Moses,' she agreed. 'Just after he'd given the Ten Commandments. I wish I wouldn't snoop,' she continued unhappily. 'I don't like to be like what I am. I talk too much. Sometimes I make trouble with the congregation.'

It seemed unfair to take advantage of these depths of self-abasement. He changed the subject to that which lay nearest his heart.

'How is Aunt Diana?' he asked.

'Oh, very restless,' she answered glibly. 'I heard mother say so. Is she expecting you?'

'Why do you ask?' he parried.

'She's always looking down the road. Tom Peebles has come too. He wants to marry Auntie Prim, but she shilly-shallies. My father says so. My father says he got the flower of the flock. Do you think he did?' she inquired anxiously.

'I can see where you're not an unmixed blessing with the congregation,' he responded. 'How's little brother?' That topic seemed safest.

Her weight, at first so inconsiderable, increased with every step until Roger was sadly reminded of

Saint Christopher's burden. Margaret had at first seemed more of a sprite than a child, and now for conversation's sake he asked her if she were really a fairy or a little girl.

'Oh, a little girl,' she assured him, adding conscientiously, 'I do look like a fairy in my dotted Swiss.'

Grace was awaiting them on the porch looking anxiously down the road. Roger carried the child into the kitchen gladly surrendering her to her mother. It was all he could do to wait with an air of interest until she had made sure that the ankle was only slightly sprained. Then, with a free heart, he asked for Diana.

Letty, whom he knew at once from what he had heard of her, answered, 'I'll call her. She's up in her room.'

He looked uneasily about the big kitchen for a private nook. Bearing down from the direction of the sitting-room came Primrose, Mrs. Boone, and Uncle Lige, who was taking life easy as a part of funeral decorum.

Roger looked down at Letty with pleading in his handsome eyes. 'Could I go up to her? I'd like to find her alone. I've counted on surprising her.'

Letty nodded with instant sympathy. 'I'll show you the way,' she said, and ran lightly before him up the narrow stair. He toiled on after her still out of breath, still in his heavy coat with his hat in his hand.

It struck him as absurd that he should be going to Diana with a hat in his hand. He looked down the upper hall for a place to lay it. It was bare save for the strip of rag carpet down the centre. Not a table, not a chair met his eye. The second door was ajar and, with his usual impulsiveness, he tossed his hat within as he walked behind Letty giving it no further thought. As it happened, the room was Stephen's and the arc which the hat described ended abruptly on that young man's head. Roger, blissfully unconscious, paused as Letty stopped before Diana's door. She was so small and lithe that though her motion had ceased she still appeared to him like a leaf blown by a wind too slight to ruffle yet strong enough to buoy her up against the air.

'I never thought to take your hat and coat,' she chided herself in a voice scarcely above the whisper of such a wind. 'Let me have them.'

He surrendered his coat, airily explaining, 'I tossed my hat into the room with the open door.' Looking back, they saw Stephen bearing witness to the truth of his remark, the hat perched rakishly on his head, an expression of blank amazement on his face.

'Now, I trust he doesn't think I meant that as a gift,' reflected Roger, and knocked lightly.

Diana watching with Grace had seen him coming with Margaret in his arms. She had fled from the sight and was now crouched on the floor in her room. She was scolding herself for behaving like a school-

girl, she was crying, she was terribly glad of his coming, she was so afraid of showing too much of her joy, she was equally fearful of niggardly concealing too much. She had wanted to lock herself in, but her door had only an old-fashioned latch.

Again he knocked.

'May I come in?' he asked softly and hesitated.

Emboldened by her silence, he lifted the latch and entered. His Diana crouched on her bedroom floor! His darling sitting there crying her heart out! Pure pity, overwhelming tenderness overmastered him. She had wondered what words she should use, she had groped for them as for treasures to barter with him, but when he had raised her to the level of his heart, when her head lay on his breast, there was no need of spoken language. There was no need for barter, for all that one had was become the other's.

CHAPTER XXV

OLD JAFFREY

Old Jaffrey Boone was buried from the church as befitted an elder and a man generous to good works. If he had known how little glory he reaped from his own obsequies, it is likely he would have cared less. The transcendent figure of the occasion was Melissa, who sang two solos. There she stood like a pilloried saint gaped at by a suspicious throng. She seemed to give forth the odor of sanctity. Her lovely face suggested sorrow, her slanting eyes surely glimpsed heaven, the purity of her pallor proved as she intended the best witness of her innocence. Stephen, sitting between his bereaved mother and Letty, looked wistfully at her. He thought her like a tall, pale lily. If her stalk had been broken, his had been the desecrating hand. Then the old longing surged over him. It passed leaving a torpid peace. His self-respect had suffered greatly because he had been powerless of his own volition to break her spell. Not only had Amory repulsed him, but Melissa, too cautious to risk even a note, too guarded to grant a stolen interview, had yet by looks forbade, let him know that all was over there. Wretchedly he wondered what share if any he had had in his father's death. The uneasiness, the anxious face of that word-

less man had gone unnoticed, but now that it was all too late, he realized that he had seen them, that he had understood the expostulation which his father had not been able to express. Had not this care eaten in secret at the heart of that goodly beech tree so that it had fallen long before the time appointed? His heart was too bruised to endure such thoughts. The sermon had not power to divert them. Resolutely he fixed his mind on the changes coming to his own life. The farm would assuredly be his and he was boy enough to be pleased with the new dignity. He would not care to make many changes, none at all, he thought, but it would be fine to be 'boss' even though he took no advantage from his title.

That night at Beechwood, Diana had a long talk with her mother. She found her in the bedroom which for forty years had been called 'mother's room.' No one had ever thought of it as belonging to old Jaffrey, yet on entering it the girl was conscious of a chill as of sunshine suddenly withdrawn.

The mother sat in the old stuffed rocker with the family Bible on her lap just as she often sat on Sunday afternoons. She was filling in the years of the old man. She showed Diana what she had written. The year of his birth was there, but no birthday was recorded.

'He never knew the day,' the mother said regretfully, 'but we always celebrated June 21st 'cause he thought it was sometime in summer.'

Diana, holding the book a minute, remarked, 'What a bother he must have found it on that long march!'

'Yes,' the mother agreed mildly, 'but he set great store by it; that and the Geoffrey de Bohun portrait. He wasn't much of a hand for talking, but he said once the Bible showed his folks was Christians and the portrait proved they was gentlefolk. That's how you and Primrose got your fancy names, o' course, from his side.'

Diana kneeling put her elbows on her mother's lap and rested her chin on her palms. 'Mother,' she asked abruptly, 'I dare say you'd think I was crazy if I suggested having Martin marry Roger and me right away.'

'I don't know as I should,' the mother answered slowly.

'To-morrow,' the girl hazarded.

'I guess 'twill be all right. I guess your father would be real pleased, Diana. He always looked to have his girls marry.'

'You wouldn't think I was heartless?' Diana asked the question eagerly, but without waiting for an answer went rapidly on: 'He must get back and we can't bear another separation. Being married here with you and Stephen and Prim and Grace looking on seems more like real marriage,' her voice pleaded with emotion. It didn't seem possible that such a wished-for consummation could follow her desires.

'It's all right,' said her mother soothingly, 'it's all right, mother's baby. Marriage isn't a party. It's just as solemn as a funeral. There's no disrespect to your father. It's some because you love him that you can't bear to live alone any longer and that you feel getting married here means more than in New York.' She smoothed her child's hair while Diana wept. Presently she asked practically, 'How about your school, Diana?'

'I'll resign right away and finish the term if no one else can be found. There are the greatest number of trifling difficulties, but once I have Roger, they won't bother me a bit. We're so silly, mother. Even now we might quarrel and lose each other. I want to make sure of him and he of me.'

'What if you quarrel then?' her mother asked, showing for the first time uneasiness.

'It sounds crazy, I know, but it won't matter then, not the same way. Once he knows he's sure of me, he won't be hurt so easily' — she paused, aware of being unconvincing; then added with a wail, 'Oh Mother, we know; truly we know.'

'There are other things we must discuss,' she went on in a practical voice as she strove to call her attention from her own affairs. 'Your plans: You'll stay on with Letty and Stephen, I suppose. And you'll make long visits to Grace and me. Roger does so like you, Mother,' she interpolated as if that indeed put a peak on praise. 'Of course, the farm will be Ste-

phen's, or perhaps it's yours to come to him out and out later.'

'Well, no,' said her mother unwillingly. 'Your father did make a will. You remember hearing how Grandpa Haynes when he died left this farm to your father, leaving what money he had in the bank to your grandma, and the farm over to Freedom to your uncle that your father came North with after the war? By rights the farm here would 'a' been mine, but I was pleased he should leave it to Jaffrey. Well, your father went and did much the same thing. He's left me the money in the bank; but the farm and everything on it goes to Jaffrey.'

'Mother!' exclaimed Diana in outraged bewilderment.

Her mother nodded. 'I'll make free to tell you particulars, Diana, but don't let it go farther. Your father and I had words once about Jaffrey and I see this will is dated right along about that time. He says in it he leaves it all to Jaffrey as a proof of confidence that he'll do right by his brother and sisters.'

'Whatever for? I can't imagine you and father having words! About Jaffrey, too!'

'When you come home from Rio, four years ago, Jaffrey wrote wanting we should leave him the farm. He had a bee in his bonnet about turning it into an estate, founding a family, he called it, or some such nonsense.'

Uneasily Diana recalled his fervent utterances,

'Bohun of Beech' echoed in her ears. 'Even so, Mother, he'll play fair with Stephen. He'll never want to live here. He'll put Stephen in charge with a good fat salary. He'll deserve father's confidence.'

'I doubt it,' said her mother candidly. 'Just look back and see if you can remember Jaffrey's giving up anything once he had his clutches on it. When you were a child, do you remember his wanting that knife of yours? He never rested easy till he got it.'

Diana nodded.

'Books, too, or a bird's nest, anything he happened to fancy. I don't say he's stingy. He can be right down lavish, but if he wants a thing he gets it if the Devil stands in the door. Give up! There's no "give up" to Jaffrey! Your father used to tell you how, come along back a thousand years, there was a pirate in the family. That old pirate has come to life again and his name is Geoffrey Bohun spelled with a G.' She paused, then continued, 'I'm sorry for Stephen and Letty, but they're young and I wouldn't wonder if it proved their best good. Stephen needs dumping out of here. He's got a grand voice that ought to do for him. Letty'll take on some of the world's ways and be a help to him. She's the faithfullest little soul. This friend of yours, Diana, has made a sight of trouble. I hope she won't follow him if he gets away.'

Diana was silent and a longer pause ensued. The mother spoke again: 'Maybe it's pure and unadulterated selfishness on my part, but I'm the one I've

got most sympathy for. 'Twon't be my home any more with that foreigner, Anita. He'll likely clear part of the beech wood and put a marble palace up yonder. Like as not this house'll be torn down. Leastways he'll call it some fancy names — the dower house, maybe, or the lodge. Let me tell you, Diana, your mother ain't going to keep a lodge, not at her time of life,' she ended firmly.

Diana kissed her, laughing at the vision evoked of her buxom mother opening a gate for visitors to the great house. 'You're talking nonsense, and you know it. You feel uprooted, but Jaffrey isn't an unnatural son. He'll behave, you'll see. Anita is really a dear. I've told you she looks like a horse, but it's the handsomest horse ever I saw. Such a sizable creature! Such arms and legs! Not fat, you know. She never has to lift a finger, but what a help in haying she could be! And her head is all covered with adorable, short black curls just like a child's. And her great red-brown eyes in her long face!'

'Don't sound a mite pretty to me,' objected her mother.

'That's because she is an unfamiliar type.'

'She's a Catholic,' Mother Boone said distrustfully.

'She's a Christian,' said the daughter stoutly.

'She's half Spanish,' said Mrs. Boone in the voice of a mourning dove.

'She's half English,' defended Diana, 'and all

American in her marriage and she's a devoted wife and mother. You could put it on her tombstone.'

At that Mrs. Boone laid down her arms. 'You know her and I don't, but we shall see what we shall see,' she ended darkly.

'Mother,' said Diana, 'you think Jaffrey is going to behave badly and you're thinking all the horrid things possible about Anita so if he does wrong you can blame it all on her.'

'I don't know but I am,' confessed her mother.

CHAPTER XXVI

A RUSTIC IDYLL

Primrose found life terrible after Grace with her family and Roger with Diana had all departed. The suddenness of her bereavement and the excitement of the funeral had kept her from realizing her loss, but alone with her mother, Stephen, and Letty, she grieved bitterly for her father and for the first time in her twenty years gave anxious thought to life and its meaning.

Melissa's condition was now apparent and its cause regarded as certainty by the villagers was matter of sad suspicion among Stephen's own family. Primrose half-blamed Letty, sure that a man could never have been so disloyal to herself. Yet she was very fond of Letty and sorry for her and for Stephen, too. These compassionate feelings she revealed only by being extremely irritable with them. Uncle Lige said she snapped off their heads every time they opened them.

Her victims were too miserable to care. Letty, shadow-like, white-lipped, expecting she knew not what, went through the days in silence. Stephen kept out of sight as much as he could. He did not see Melissa. He worked hard and spent most of his time about the sugar shanty gathering the sap and boiling it down into syrup, part of which was destined to

become delightful little cakes stamped with the beech leaf, sign manual of the Boones.

Life, which had often appalled the brother and sister with its stability, had become strangely shifting. Changes had begun and more were imminent. They were dependent on Jaffrey's will. Just as he was the dictator of their actual lives, Melissa held their imagination enchained. She was a beautiful sorceress, herself now enslaved by a superior spirit, but destined soon to burst her bonds.

The will had made Primrose furiously angry. Her father had put them all at Jaffrey's mercy, but she for one would never be dependent on that uncertain quality. With the self-confidence of youth, she began to review her resources, but she was soon forced to confess them small. She had not sufficient training to get her a better teaching position. She had no money for such training. A year ago she could have borrowed from Diana, but to take from Roger was worse than to be beholden to Jaffrey. Grace and her husband were poor. Her mother had only three thousand-odd in the bank. What to do besides teaching, she hadn't an idea. She supposed any respectable work required training. Tom Peebles represented the only conceivable means of escape from Jaffrey's domination. With all the disadvantages of marriage which she had before her in the cases of Amory and Melissa, Stephen and Letty, Primrose was surprised to find how gladly her heart welcomed

the suggestion. She was all for fairness and didn't like, she told herself, to make a convenience of Tom. Once sure she loved him, she would be within her rights, but she wasn't sure. She remembered her old longing for freedom which now seemed to her like a garment too fine for any party to which she could expect an invitation. It was only a fancy of youth, she decided sadly. Life was bondage, and she was lucky if she could choose her master. Then she laughed thinking of Tom's kindliness. It was more likely he'd feel the slave.

A day came in mid-March when the air was full of treacherous softness. Little muddy rivulets ran down the hill into the road from the dark patches of snow here and there in the woods. A warm sun shone on the tin roof over the kitchen. An adventurous robin, who had come back too soon, chirped to give them greeting. Primrose, early awake and stirred by these signs of Nature's rebirth, felt that she could bear waiting no longer and went to Stephen asking for the loan of old Brutus for that day and the next. She made a great point now of Stephen's authority as if she were thus asserting the younger brother's claim against the elder.

Stephen readily granted Brutus asking with passing curiosity what she planned to do with him.

'I'm going to Tom's.' She looked about defiantly. 'I'll be back to-morrow.'

'Are you invited?' her mother asked uneasily.

'Mrs. Peebles has often had Tom invite me,' she said defensively.

'Not this time?'

'No.'

'Don't you go, Prim. It don't look nice nor a bit like you. You ask Tom to come here.'

Primrose shook her head miserably. 'I want to go,' she said, choking down surprising tears. 'I don't want to wait a minute.'

Unexpectedly Letty came to the rescue. 'She can say she had the day and could have the horse so she thought she'd drive over. If she starts right off she can get home to-night if it's not convenient for Mrs. Peebles to have her stay. She can do some trading. The stores are lots better than down to the village. Nobody'd ever be so silly as to think our Prim was running after a man.'

Primrose, dumb for once, looked her thanks.

'Well,' said the mother uncertainly. 'Well. Maybe. It wouldn't have done when I was a girl, but girls are different nowadays.' She rose and began to bustle about. 'I've got a roll of butter to send Mrs. Peebles. Letty, you get two dozen of the white eggs. Stephen, fetch a gallon of syrup. Uncle Lige can hitch up and, Prim, you hurry up so's you can get home to-night if you see you're not wanted.'

'If Mrs. Peebles doesn't want me, I'll come home,' said Primrose, 'but if Tom doesn't want me, I'll just plain murder him.'

Every one hurried, even Uncle Lige, but, in spite of the early start, the roads were bad, Brutus more cautious than behooved the bearer of his noble name, and Prim had twenty miles to go, so when at last she drove down the long street of the county seat, the clock on the old white church said two and she was vexed to be so late for dinner. From Tom's description it was easy to find the home of Dr. Peebles, a white house with green blinds and no front lawn, built in days when neighbors were more precious than land. It had two wings, one of which contained the offices of the two doctors. The low second story with dormer windows extended only over the wings, the central part of the house consisting of lofty rooms.

Prim wanted to ring Tom's office bell, but thought it more proper to find Mrs. Peebles, so, tying the willing Brutus to the hitching-post, she ran up the steps. There was just time between her ring and the opening of the front door for her to realize how muddy and crumpled she was after her long drive. A brisk, white-haired woman in a trim black-and-white house gown answered the bell and Prim knew at once that this was Tom's mother.

'The office ——' the older woman began briskly.

'I'm Primrose Boone,' the girl interrupted hurriedly. 'I was in town and thought I'd make a call,' she hesitated in embarrassment.

Mrs. Peebles waxed cordial. 'Come right in, child.

Your people were so good to my Tom, I've always wanted to know you.'

'Just as if,' thought Prim, 'any one of the Boones would have done as well as I.'

'Have you had your dinner? Of course, you haven't. Well, come right in this way, and by the time you've washed up I'll have things ready. Food always on tap in a doctor's house, you know.'

'She's awfully nice,' thought Prim, 'but I wish to goodness I hadn't come.' Aloud she was accepting a cordial invitation to pass the night.

Leaving Primrose entrenched in the bathroom, Mrs. Peebles tiptoed across the intervening space to Tom's office door which at that moment opened and revealed Tom yawning widely. His mother with the air of a conspirator put her finger to her lips and reaching up to take a firm hold on his ear propelled him to the front window from which they could see old Brutus calmly devouring the top of the doctor's horse-chestnut tree.

'He will have that tree by the horse block,' remarked Mrs. Peebles softly. 'This is the fifth year some dratted horse has eaten it. Only the general use of automobiles can save it.'

Tom, not interested in the yearly decapitation of the chestnut tree, was unfeignedly so in the executioner.

'She's here,' said his mother significantly. 'She's washing away the stains of travel and very stained

she is at that. Now, hark to me, Tom Peebles! You do as I bid you and I'll engage to deliver her into your hands, bound and gagged as it were.'

He wrinkled his forehead at her inquiringly.

'She's come here because she's discovered she can't live without you.' The look of joy which dawned on Tom's face annoyed her extremely. 'Don't look so silly,' she admonished him. 'If you fall into her arms that way, she'll never have a particle of respect for you. Have some pride or at least some common sense.' She paused. 'I don't suppose I can trust you, I'll see to it you're not alone with her a minute. What's more I'll have Katherine Lewis and that girl who's visiting her from Chicago down for supper. I want you, Tom, to show this girl with a ridiculous name that she's not the only pebble on the beach.'

'I say, mother, don't you think she's as pretty as a peach?'

'Yes,' his mother admitted grudgingly. 'She's pretty and she looks capable. Neat, she didn't look, but the roads are muddy and she'd been twenty miles behind an old plug. I've no doubt she's a good girl, Tom, and will make a fine wife, but I don't want any son of mine to be a carpet for her to walk on,' she ended energetically. 'Now, you beat it before she sees you.'

'No!' he protested.

'Yes,' she insisted.

'Gosh, mother! what nonsense!'

'You do as I say or it'll be the worse for you. I'll wash my hands of you and your Primrose.'

'All right,' he assented, 'have it your own way. How you do enjoy your little plots!'

Scarcely had he gone when Primrose entered in her best brown silk, very neat, very excited. Her eyes were like twin candles, eager to look for Tom, but shaded by her ardent wish to be decorous.

Mrs. Peebles took her to the dining-room and regaled her with cold roast, bread and jelly and cake, while she expatiated on Tom, his success in his practice, the help he was to his father. She knew better than to sound Tom's praises blatantly. She said just enough to hint that she was concealing much through modesty.

Primrose was a country girl, confiding and honest. Tom's home was ever so much finer than the house at Beechwood. She couldn't believe that he'd ever been a laborer on her father's farm. Mrs. Peebles was so stylish, so citified!

'I'm so glad you happened to choose to-day for your visit,' the older woman said smoothly. 'An old playmate of Tom's is coming to supper. She's bringing a friend from Chicago whose brother was in Harvard with Tom. Such a pretty girl and immensely wealthy! But she likes the country just as you do and doesn't find our sleepy old village too slow.'

Primrose felt very uncomfortable. She was tired

too. She hadn't slept the night before and such a horrid ride behind old Brutus was enough to use up any one. Where in the world was Tom?

As if in answer to the unspoken question, Mrs. Peebles went on: 'Tom is off on his drive. He uses the car now a great deal, but his father sticks to his horses. His office hours were over just after you came, but he's always very prompt at setting out.'

Primrose almost choked over her preserves. 'Did he know I was here?' she asked rather faintly.

'Oh, yes, he'll be back for supper and he's looking forward so much to seeing you then.'

'I'd have enjoyed riding in a car myself,' thought Primrose. 'I've never had a chance but twice.' For the first time she distrusted her power over Tom and trembled.

She offered to help with the dishes, but Mrs. Peebles said the maid would do them. The word overawed Prim, who wasn't used even to a 'hired girl.' Mrs. Peebles bore her off to a meeting of the Woman's Club, where Primrose sat reflecting on the folly of her visit through a course of the English poets beginning with Shakespeare and ending with Swinburne. She gained nothing from the afternoon beyond a conviction that Mrs. Peebles didn't like her and 'would set Tom up' and an assurance that Tom's popularity wasn't a fiction of his mother's, for that lady was kept busy after the meeting answering

questions about her son and seemed herself of such importance that Primrose felt unnaturally humble.

When they reached the house, they found the expected guests had arrived before them. Primrose admitted to herself that Tom's friend's sister was extremely pretty. Evidently skirts were worn much tighter! Then came Tom and shook hands with them all and gave her, she was sure, no more lasting pressure than the others. Tea came, the time wore away, and Primrose grew more silent. The friend's sister was a minx, she thought angrily. If ever a girl threw herself at a man's head, she was the girl and the head was Tom's! Mrs. Peebles asked Primrose to sing and she complied modestly. She gave them 'In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree' and 'The Sweetest Story Ever Told.' Her clear, untrained voice rang through the house as if she had been on her native hillside. Alas! the minx overwhelmed her with Mascagni's 'Ave Maria'! From that moment she had no spirit left within her and wished only for the close of the evening and for the morrow's muddy ride after old Brutus.

Then Tom beaued the girls home. As the front door closed behind them, Primrose turned with decision to Mrs. Peebles.

'I'm so sleepy, Mrs. Peebles. Riding does make me yawn so. — May I go right to bed?'

Instantly Mrs. Peebles complied, though for a moment she was afraid of Tom. She preceded Prim-

rose up the stair at the right of the living-room. A narrow hall ran along this wing and onto it opened two chambers. 'The doctor and I sleep in the front room, so you won't be alone up here,' said Mrs. Peebles. 'This is a funny old house. The wing opposite where Tom sleeps is just like this and both are as separate as if we lived in two flats. My poor doctor man came in for a bite while we were at the club and has been out ever since. There, I hear him now!' — and hastily saying good-night, she left Primrose.

The girl undressed and went to bed. She had been bottling up her tears all evening and now poured them in a perfect deluge on Mrs. Peebles's best pillow cases. She didn't know enough bad names to call herself for having been so foolish as to come. She cried and cried until she couldn't squeeze out another tear. Then she felt quiet and refreshed, but not in the least sleepy. Little by little the house became quiet. In the adjoining room she heard a deep voice which must belong to the old doctor and the crisp tones of Mrs. Peebles. Heavy steps and a humming in the room below suggested the hired girl. Then it was very quiet for a long time. The grandfather's clock in the living-room struck one. After about a week, it struck two. Never had she lain awake so long. Coffee at night was to blame, she decided.

The thought occurred to her that, if she had been foolish to come, she would be more so to return without coming to any conclusion. After all she

hadn't had a moment alone with Tom. In the morning it would be no better. Anyhow, she couldn't wait. She couldn't bear suspense another minute. She slipped out of bed and put on her negligee. At her door she stood for several minutes listening. The heavy breathing in the next room proved that the old doctor was asleep. She had accounted for the maid and Mrs. Peebles. Surely Tom had the opposite wing to himself. Probably he slept in the front room to be nearer the office telephone. Anyhow his mother wouldn't put her paragon in a back room, she reflected spitefully.

She tiptoed along the little hall and down the stair. A step creaked and frightened her so that she sat down hastily. Nothing happened and she went on, padded across the living-room and in the darkness started to mount the other stairs. She didn't know where the switch was and if she had would never have risked turning it on. She felt for the doorknob, and found the door open. She listened and heard regular breathing. 'Dear Tom, not snoring like the old chap opposite! Could snoring be hereditary? Well, one must take some chances! She was taking one this minute!'

'Tom!' she whispered cautiously.

'Tom!' — a little louder.

'Thomas Peebles,' in an audible tone. Exasperated by the peaceful regularity of his breathing, she drew off her slipper and, standing as she felt with perfect

propriety outside his door, hurled it at what she presumed was his head.

Unerring in her aim, she hit him square on the nose and he sat up with rage and surprise strongly mingled.

'What the devil ——!' he began furiously.

'Oh, Tom, hush!' she entreated in an agonized voice. 'It's only me. It's Primrose.'

He was silent for a minute while he tried to get broad awake. Then he laughed a bit. 'Do you want to ruin my reputation? Don't you know that a breath will destroy a poor doctor-man's? Go down on the stair like a good girl and I'll come instanter. Is your kimono warm?' he asked anxiously.

'Not very,' she admitted with a shiver.

'I'll bring a bed quilt,' he answered, quite wide awake now and matter of fact.

The stair was too narrow for them to sit side by side so Primrose seated herself on the step below him. Wrapped cosily in what felt like a down comfort, she hoped the stairs weren't dusty, but that, of course, they wouldn't be, not with such a woman.

'What's the big idea, Prim?' he asked chattily.

'Oh, Tom, I'm so miserable,' she began, and then hesitated. He patted her shoulder encouragingly and she tried again. 'Oh, Tom, do you love me the least little bit?'

'Surest thing you know,' he answered comfortably and stooping put an arm about her.

'Well, that's all right then,' she said in a relieved

voice. 'Then I'm not miserable. Then I'm most awfully happy,' she went on shakily, 'for I love you, too, Tom. I love you something awful.'

After all there was a way two could sit quite comfortably on a stair.

'Since when?' he asked curiously.

'Always, I guess. I didn't know for sure until today. I came 'way over here with that awful old Brutus to tell you I'd marry you if you still wanted me. But I wasn't sure I loved you. Only the farm is Jaffrey's and I won't be beholden to him and I don't know any good way to support myself and so I thought if you'd take me on those terms, I'd marry you. But now it's all different. I do care. I do care just terribly.'

They were so happy.

'Well, you know, Tom, I always thought such a lot of freedom.'

'I remember hearing you mention it,' he agreed cautiously.

'When I decided to marry you, it seemed as if I were free only to choose a master. Now, I see it's not like that.'

'No,' he answered, but she was too intent on what she was saying to observe the unnecessary fervor.

'Those who won't be in bondage are awfully selfish, aren't they, Tom? They make every one else slaves. Every one else has to suffer so they can do as they please. All at once they find they're slaves, too.

Oh, Tom, Stephen and Melissa are so miserable.'

The thought of them contrasted so painfully with her own happiness that for a few minutes she wept easily and freely on his breast. 'It's worse for them,' she said when she could speak again. 'They suffer more than Amory and Letty who haven't been wicked. Oh, Tom, I guess it's only living for others makes us free.'

'Why did you drive Brutus, dearest?' he asked curiously. 'Wouldn't Stephen let you take a better horse?'

'Oh, yes,' she answered. 'But I was so miserable, I just wanted Brutus.'

The electric light flashed on in the room below throwing its radiance far enough up the shadowy stair to reveal Tom holding a tearful Primrose wrapped in a down comfort. Mrs. Peebles advanced briskly.

'You are the most inconsiderate young people,' she was saying. 'Here was your father out all last night on a confinement case and likely to be called again before morning and you two talking at the top of your lungs on a cold, draughty staircase at half-past two in the morning.'

She sounded argumentative rather than cross, so Primrose plucked up courage to say, 'I just came to tell Tom I loved him, Mrs. Peebles.'

'I see you have glimmerings of reason,' the older lady retorted, 'but I can't say much for your choice

of time and place. As for the girl, I think she'll suit the Peebles family.' She hugged Primrose, bed quilt and all, then sat down on the step below announcing that she must shed a tear or two. She did no such thing, but bounced immediately to her feet and suggested making cocoa or they'd never get back to sleep again. They had cocoa and doughnuts out in the warm kitchen and talked a great deal about the practical affairs of the young people. It was four o'clock before they went to bed, and Primrose, who had thought herself too happy to close her eyes, fell at once into a slumber which lasted until the middle of the morning.

By some manœuvring Tom managed to drive Primrose home that afternoon, thus saving her face and prolonging their happiness. Uncle Lige was on the back stoop as they drove into the yard behind the unhurried Brutus.

'Well, Primrose, I opine ye went right after him this trip,' he chuckled. 'If so be as it were he wished to escape, ye have him lashed to your chariot wheels.'

The old man's joke had too much truth in it to please Primrose, who blushing fierily flounced out of the buggy leaving Tom to do as he pleased about following. Hesitating between Brutus and the Boone family, he chose to be after Prim who had burst in on her mother and Letty.

'Well, girls,' she was saying, in an attempt at humor, 'kill the fatted calf. Tom's here.'

Letty looked inquiring.

'Yes,' said Prim, nodding her head vigorously, a good many more times than necessary.

Tom slipped an arm about her. There they stood, proud, handsome, conventional. Running true to form, Mrs. Boone produced a flood of tears which seemed to break the spell binding Prim.

'Why tears, mother? You know you've been pining for this ever since you first set eyes on Tom.' She turned to Tom, slightly aggrieved. 'Really I don't understand mother.'

'I do,' he laughed, good-humoredly. He went over to Mrs. Boone and gave her a bear hug. 'I'll be as good as gold to her, Mother Boone,' he promised.

'I've not a doubt of it,' she said, laughing through her tears. 'It's you, Tom, I'm crying for.'

Next day when Tom left them, the Boones fell to planning. It had been well enough for Diana to go to New York without a trousseau. She had some money and Roger more, and anyway she would be among strangers, but it wasn't fair to Tom's family for Prim to go among them quite destitute and Boone pride couldn't permit it. It had been settled by Tom's people that the marriage could take place almost immediately and that the young folk should for a time make their home with their seniors. Primrose disliked taking from her mother's limited means. Stephen had nothing, since the place and its appurtenances were Jaffrey's. The women planned and

sewed and scrimped until the eagle screamed, so Prim said. Diana helped them out with pretty ready-mades and Grace was more generous than she could afford to be. Mrs. Boone gave her six pillows which she had stuffed with live geese feathers and six patch-work quilts which Prim received with indifference changing to respect when she saw her mother-in-law's enthusiasm. Ten years later she herself appreciated their marvellous, intricate patterns and esteemed them priceless.

Like Diana she had no wedding at all, but nothing mattered to her so she could have her Tom. Besides, as she told her mother, there was the reception to look forward to. Mrs. Peebles was planning on making it a soul-stirring event when the young couple should return from the honeymoon. Father and Mother Peebles's check was to provide the journey. Niagara Falls was near, but Prim would rather have died than go there. Such fun as people made of bridal couples going to the Falls! Washington was her choice and, having never been farther afield than Buffalo, she felt like a globe-trotter. She grew so pretty in her happiness, in her love which beat its wings so strongly and so steadily within her heart, that people looked at her with surprise. She was like a plant which, prized for its foliage, astonishes us by putting forth exquisite blossoms.

So Prim was married and went away. After her going Letty said wistfully that it was like going back

to kerosene lamps after having had electricity. Every one was sad at Beechwood. The mother began to show signs of breaking. At every turn she missed old Jaffrey. How dreary to waken at night, to stretch out an arm, to find nothing! Her old head had lain in the hollow of his shoulder; it was so lonely now.

Uncle Lige too ruminated often and long on the transitoriness of human life.

'Life is a vale of years,' he would say in the tone of one making a profound discovery. 'We are like the little flowers of the spring. We wither. We are cut down.' Then he would sigh gustily and Mrs. Boone would echo him. Again, as he ladled in great knife loads of corn beef, he would remark dolorously, 'Why labor for the meat which perishes? A hundred years hence, if so be that the world still standeth, naught will remain of our futile endeavor.'

Such talk, Letty confided to Stephen, drove her half crazy.

Stephen had never even heard it. He had been so involved in his own perturbed thoughts that he seemed not to be one of them. Now he listened and checked Uncle Lige sharply.

The old fellow was saying dolefully, 'I would not be like the unthinking war-horse that rushes into the battle ——'

'Don't worry,' interrupted Stephen. 'No one ever accused you of rushing. Cheer up, Uncle Lige! This kind of talk makes Letty feel bad. Look at mother,

God knows I'm not so worried about how short life is as how I'm going to get through with it.' He found it a relief to have some one besides himself to blame for something.

CHAPTER XXVII

RETRIBUTION

April had passed before Primrose's flitting, a rainy May followed, and then in came June bringing the latest spring of many years. One soft, mild evening after a rainy day, the sun appeared only to sink into a gulf of fire, fading to violet, then to gray ashes. A thrush sang in the woods; there rose the faint odor of damp moss permeated with the earthy smell of lady's-slippers and dogtooth violets; the mournful note of a hoot owl sounded twice from the deeper woods. Stephen was riding the Little Mare to town. He and his mother and Letty had settled into a moriatum until Jaffrey should come. Each day as it passed seemed so like the one before that they rested in a false security. Their reason told them this state of things was bound to end shortly; their instinct asserted it to be unchanging.

To-night the boy thought quietly about the happy outcome of Prim's love affair and of Diana's marriage. He had had as much of a chance as either, but he had wrecked his life. Jaffrey had three sons and two daughters, and he would never have a child to call him father. Once he had not thought it a matter for grief, but now he knew something of what he had lost and knew that with the years such a sorrow would deepen.

Stephen wondered idly at the Vaughans' staying so long in the village. He couldn't understand it. Maybe they were giving folks time to get over talking. Yet back in New York talk wouldn't bother them. The Little Mare, startled by a rabbit's running across the road, reared and pranced and made a great parade of fright. He had to give all his attention to quieting her. Too many oats and too little exercise, he decided. He hadn't been to town often and he never used the Little Mare for farm work. She was five years old now and hadn't killed him yet in spite of certain grim prophecies. He wondered what he should do with her when he left the farm. Taking her to New York was out of the question. He couldn't bear the thought of parting. She was a treasure! She'd never given him anything but delight. She was different from the rest of her sex.

He cantered over the first bridge still in its red priming. Then on an impulse he turned to the hill road at the right which by a roundabout path would take him past Melissa's house on his way to the horse sheds. It was long that he had not seen her. She had not been at choir rehearsal or at church since her appearance at his father's funeral. He looked hungrily toward the house.

There she was at the window. Her bare arms rested on the sill, she was leaning forward, her face turned toward the west illumined by the tender light of twilight showing it all wistfulness and beauty. Their

eyes met, but she gave no sign of recognition. He rode on to the horse sheds and dismounted. The peace of the evening was utterly destroyed. Out of that small-paned window, Melissa had looked like a prisoner through bars. He was once more ravaged by the sense of guilt. He had forged her chains; he had barred her into prison. She was no witch; she was a woman who suffered, who was doomed to further suffering. His heart ached with pity for her. In the darkness of the stall, a sob welled up in his throat. He leaned against the Little Mare. He hid his face in her mane. He wept while she stood close to him and a shudder of sympathy ran through her beautiful brown body.

'Stephen!' Melissa's voice came out of the shadows. He had a glimpse of her white face, her hand was on his shoulder. 'Poor boy! Oh, poor boy!' she said with tears in her voice. The Little Mare had stopped shuddering and stood perfectly still. Stephen had forgotten her. He was close to Melissa. He was about to take her in his arms, but the Little Mare was too quick for him. Whether from jealousy or pure malice, she raised her dainty hoof. She struck with the speed of the adder's forked tongue, struck at Melissa. Suspecting nothing, turned toward Stephen, she received the glancing blow and dropped at Stephen's feet. He picked her up, heavy, inert, and carried her to her house.

There was no one about, but the door was open. In

the hall, a lamp burned. He bore her through the house to the downstairs chamber and laid her on Amory's bed. He saw then that, though unconscious, she still lived. A doctor must be fetched. He ran as fast as he could. Passing the post office, he saw Amory emerging. Distinctly he observed his limp, the magazines in his hands. On top lay a long, blue envelope.

'Your wife's hurt,' he shouted hoarsely. 'I'm after the doctor!'

Amory started, looked after him, then turned home.

The unhappy woman lived through that night, the next day, and until an hour before dawn of the second. During the first night she spoke a little with the greatest difficulty. 'I didn't plan to go. I saw his face. So terrible!'

Amory patted her hand, silently. Later she begged Amory to send for Letty.

'No confession — dear,' he entreated with a wry smile.

'I must see Letty,' she repeated stubbornly.

So Letty came and helped the nurse and worked about the house, remaining within call. Once busied at the washstand, her back to the bed, she felt Melissa's eyes upon her. Turning, she saw consciousness within them and went over to the bed.

'I suppose the baby will die, Letty. If it lives, should you like it?'

Letty nodded, her eyes full of tears. She kneeled down and kissed Melissa's hand.

'Not all wicked,' whispered Melissa, coaxingly.

'No, no!' said Letty.

Melissa did not speak again. A little girl was born an hour before she died, premature, pitiable in the extreme. Letty never took her eyes off while the doctor and nurse attended her.

'It can't live,' he said dubiously.

'Oh, try! try!' she urged in a passion of pleading.

He looked at her in surprise. If this were Stephen's child, as every one believed, why was Letty so concerned for her? But who could ever explain a woman's actions? He shrugged and looked back at the baby.

The little creature wrapped in cotton wool lying on a pillow looked terribly old and wrinkled. Letty bending over her wished she could give her her own blood, her own strength. Suppose Amory refused to let her have the baby? Fear smote her, but she put it resolutely by as belonging to the time when the little traveller should have elected to tarry.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LITTLE MARE

After Stephen had found the doctor, he had ridden the Little Mare home to Beechwood. At first he could scarcely restrain himself from beating and kicking her. Later his mood changed to tenderness. The Little Mare was docile. She flew lightly and steadily over the ground. She was like a woman trying to please her lord. Stephen wanted to hold her back. The ride — the last ride — was so short. At Beechwood, he tied her to the hitching-post and entered the house. Letty was in the kitchen ignorant of the tragedy. He did not speak to her, but passed grimly through the house and upstairs after the gun which he kept in his room. At the front door, he hesitated and, laying down his gun, went back to the dining-room. There he took sugar lumps from the bowl, stuffed them into his pocket, and went back to the Little Mare.

He loosed her and led her over the lawn, across the road, and up the beech wood path. She followed obediently, rubbing her shoulder now and then against him, sniffing at his pocket. It was very dark, but she picked her way daintily along the uneven path.

By the last great sentinel beech, Stephen halted,

From this, the summit of the rise, he could look over into the valley. It was full of mist and in the darkness bore the look of a silver lake. A few stars peered vaguely losing themselves in the nebulous mass. It was an illusion of water, itself the symbol of forgetfulness. He wished he could hurl himself down and drown in its depths, and when sober day had changed the enchanted lake back to solid earth that he might be dissolved into its elements, to be thrown up and under by the plough, to become a corporate part of the black soil, to be no longer Boone but Beechwood itself.

He gave the Little Mare the sugar he had brought. There he parted with her. It seemed a hundred years since he had dreaded leaving her behind.

CHAPTER XXIX

AMORY AND LETTY

Amory brought up the question of the baby the very next night. Letty had carried her into the kitchen where a fire burned. The little creature, too small and weak to be dressed, lay on a pillow muffled in its wrappings until only the eyes and tip of nose showed. Without any occupation pressing, Letty sat watching, hovering over her like a guardian angel. She prayed fervently. She was sure that God didn't want her to lose this baby. He had taken her little boy, but she had been unconscious, powerless to help him to live. She was helping God now. Together they would save this baby.

Amory came into the kitchen and looked curiously down at her. 'You love babies, don't you, Letty?' he asked gently.

Letty looked back at him. Instinctively her hands clasped. 'Melissa gave her to me,' she murmured.

'I see you want her,' he said after a long silence.

Each was wondering how much the other knew and neither wanted to hurt the other already so sorely stricken.

'I should like to provide for her financially,' he began awkwardly.

'No, no,' she interrupted hurriedly. 'Stephen couldn't allow that, not unless it was to keep her from starving to death.'

'Letty knows,' he thought sadly. Her compassion over this little unfortunate seemed to him boundlessly beautiful.

'I'm afraid, Letty, there'll be gossip which will hurt you more than ever, if you take the baby.'

'It doesn't hurt me,' she answered quietly. 'Things have been too bad with me for me to care what people say. The baby's all either you or I have got, Amory. If you want her like I do, maybe I hadn't ought to take her, but I feel I can do more for her even if we haven't money. Seems like, too, I have the best right,' she added simply.

'I shouldn't like to give up all responsibility,' he said.

'I guess we could settle that all right, by and by,' she answered evenly. 'I'd trust you anyhow, Amory. We want to do what's right for the baby. Maybe if you just let me have her awhile now, things will shape out all right for her.'

'Her name is Melisande,' he said irrevelantly.

Letty started, then sighed. The baby was worth more of a sacrifice than that.

'How do you spell it?' she asked meekly.

It didn't seem to her as if she could leave Melisande, as she conscientiously named her even in thought, to go to Melissa's funeral. Then she heard Stephen was

to sing and dared not stay away. She supposed he wanted to stop gossip, just as she was sure Melissa had planned to do when she sang at Father Boone's funeral.

In truth, Stephen had never thought of such a practical motive. He was actuated by something far deeper. He could have plucked handfuls of hair from his head and strewn sacrificial locks on the bier of his lost lady. He had nothing, nothing to give her but his voice, and that he offered as did others their gifts of choice blossoms. Melissa must be laid away in silence and in darkness, but while the light still illumined her body he would pour over it his golden song. No one here but Melissa had known its worth. No one living could guess what this would cost him. He would drown her in it as the dark flood had threatened once to drown her. Oh, that it had had its will of them both! His voice should be like the precious ointment of nard which another sinner had poured over stainless feet. Against the day of her burial would he anoint her.

Now the minister was saying, 'Brother Stephen will render a solo.' He arose, he sent forth his voice in majesty: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth . . . and though worms destroy this body ——'

He looked down from the choir loft upon the angelic beauty that had been Melissa. 'O God! must her body be destroyed? She had loved her body, had

lived at ease within it. She had neither toiled nor spun. In the house of life she had rested knowing pleasure. She had lived in her senses. Her body had sufficed for contentment. What would be left when the worms had had their way with Melissa?'

His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. A dreadful shudder racked him, a sob broke. Tearing his eyes from her placid face, he looked fearfully about for a way of escape. The sliding doors behind the choir loft were pushed open for ventilation. He leaped through them ten feet down into the prayer meeting room. He was alone, but he had not escaped. Whither should he flee? O for the Little Mare and a leap into the grave yawning for Melissa!

Letty came to him there. Gently she patted his arm. 'Don't, Stephen. Don't take on so,' she murmured, but he neither saw nor felt her. She dared not leave him. The thought of little Melisande wrung her heart.

'Quick, Stephen,' she said with vigor. 'Come along with me. I'll get baby and we'll go along home before the folks get out of church.'

'What baby?' he asked vaguely.

'Melisande, stupid,' she retorted. Scolding, she thought, might rouse him. 'Can I trust you to get the team, Stephen?' she asked anxiously.

He nodded. Through his bewilderment he knew that Letty was helping him out again. In a few

minutes they were on the uphill journey, Letty holding in her arms her precious burden. She was in terror over both her children, but Stephen was her elder care.

CHAPTER XXX

AMORY AND THE MOTHER

Uncle Lige had refused to accompany the Boones to Melissa's funeral, so it came about that in the family pew near the front of the church there were seated only the mother and Letty. There had been no open breach, and it seemed right that they, as the only friends Melissa had in the village, should pardon any injuries she had done them and appear publicly to mourn. They were in the outward mourning which had been purchased for their own recent loss, and a stranger glancing across the church from Amory in his unaccustomed black to the women in their heavy veils would have wondered that they were not together. As it had been with Audrey, there was no one to be sorry Melissa had died. Neither was there any to be glad. Margaret Boone was too bewildered and Letty had gone too far into the house of Despair for another's death to set her free. Each of them felt Stephen's hand in her death and would have assumed the guilt and the punishment had that been possible.

Margaret Boone trembled violently when Stephen arose to sing. She had not seen him before where he had sat huddled beside the organ. Now instinctive pride rose in her and lifted up her own bent head. Standing there above the heads of the congregation,

he towered as magnificent as one of the Boone beeches; he was broader than young Jaffrey had been when she last saw him, a huger build too than his father. His red-gold curls clustered about the forehead too lined for a boy of twenty-two. His large, handsome mouth was firmly set. His face, which she had often seen of late distorted by his anguish, was for the moment calm as a death mask. He was like one whose cup of suffering had brimmed so that the rest fell unheeded on the ground. Then he began to sing. Her boy! And such a voice as an archangel might raise before the God whom he adored. She saw his eyes seek Melissa's face. She saw him waver, marked the break in his voice, the agonized looking about for escape. He was like an animal trapped and tortured. He had turned, he had leapt down, he was gone from them. She half rose to go to him, but Letty was before her, had pushed gently past, had silently slipped from the room.

Nothing had ever been so terrible to Margaret Boone. It was true that the Boones had held their heads high. Now they were brought very low. She had borne six children, and five of them yet lived, but here she was alone. Alone! to endure this disgrace, this humiliation. She had laid away old Jaffrey and her sorrow had brought her closer to heaven. In this sorrow she could not see the 'finger of God.' This came of sin. God did not send these griefs. Yet He permitted the innocent to endure

them. She was glad to endure her share. She didn't mind suffering with Stephen. But it was very hard to sit alone here before all these curious people.

Amory sat in the end of the front pew across the church. He saw the black-robed figure, which had been bowed, erect to stand the fusillade of eyes behind her. He guessed her loneliness easily enough, for he, too, was bitterly alone. The choir was singing hastily to cover the commotion caused by Stephen's harrowing action. Under protection of their voices, Amory walked hastily across the church and seated himself beside the mother. Over her black-gloved hand he laid his own sensitive fingers. She put her other hand on his and thus they sat comforting each other through that torturing hour. They walked together the short distance to the cemetery; stood hand in hand by the open grave, with the many watchers circling them at a respectful distance. The good old minister was about to sprinkle ashes, but Amory impulsively snatched up a handful of the roses which lay all about the grave and gave them to him with an imploring smile. Their petals fell softly above what had been the perfect fleshly blossom.

Margaret, happier now in feeling that Amory needed her and that she was still of use in the world, drew him away with her before the sexton started his bitter labor. She had his arm and they walked quietly back to the little house.

Lanny Todd met them. 'Letty come and took the

baby,' she said without preamble. 'She was in a great hurry to get up the hill with Steve.'

'It's all right,' he told her. 'She is to look after the little girl for a while. They've left you,' he said, turning back to Margaret. 'You must rest here until some one comes back for you.'

He helped her take off her heavy bonnet and veil. As he did so he was thinking that, if he had married Diana, he would have been a good son to this good mother. Nothing then of all this evil would have befallen. It had all come of his choosing a beauty which lacked truth.

'What are you going to do, Amory?' she asked anxiously.

'Travel,' he told her. 'I'll take the milk train back in the morning. I'll stop just long enough in New York to get some clothes and leave my keys with Diana and Roger. Then I'm off to wander. Don't look so sadly at me, dear lady,' he said. 'Don't you see how fortunate I am to have no ties to hold me, no lack of money to clip my wings?'

She nodded sadly. 'Amory,' she asked, 'how old are you?'

'Thirty-one,' he answered.

'That's just a boy,' she told him. 'Promise me, like a good boy, you won't let this spoil your life. You'll go on painting and being friends with people and not get all soured like a bitter chokecherry. You can't mend what's happened and you wa'n't to blame. Don't let it hurt ye more than you can help.'

He smiled and patted her old hand.

'Listen, Amory,' she told him. 'What my boy did wrong, I've got to suffer for. You don't wish me any harm. You don't want my punishment any heavier. The worst thing you can do to me is to let this spoil your life. It'll lie on my heart till the day of my death.'

He was much moved. He kissed her and promised. 'I'm not guiltless either,' he said. 'I oughtn't to have cared for Melissa. When I did I became responsible for her. If I'd done better, it mightn't have happened.'

CHAPTER XXXI

BREAKING UP

In July came a letter from Jaffrey giving the date of his sailing. He was coming home for good and all, he wrote. He planned to build a house at Beechwood which would be the show place for Western New York. A yearly trip to South America and a month in New York would suffice for his business interests. It seemed strange to think of all three of his sisters married. Odd, too, that he had never laid eyes on one of the men! Little Prim he still thought of as a mere baby. Well, there were bound to be changes! (Ominous phrase, thought his readers.) His own five were now beyond the baby stage. That his home would always be his mother's went without saying. Anita had planned a suite of rooms especially for her. It seemed best to tear down the old house. If Stephen and his wife liked, let them, by all means, stay on. They too were Bohuns of Beech and there would be room for all.

Thus wrote Jaffrey, genially enough, but his words gave no pleasure.

'I may stay on,' said Stephen gloomily. 'Like Uncle Lige, I suppose. I shouldn't know whether I was plain servant or expected to dwell in marble halls. Either one won't suit me.'

Letty spoke eagerly. 'Stephen Boone, if you stay on here, I lose all respect for you.' He looked at her blankly. 'When your father was alive, it was a different matter. Then you were needed. If Jaffrey wants men, he can hire them. You needn't think we're going to settle down here and live on him. If you have a mite of ambition, you'll take me and mother and Melisande to New York. You'll get on somehow with your voice. You big silly, don't you see this is your Chance?'

She was so shrill, so unlike Letty, that they all stared at her.

Stephen laughed, but then said soberly, 'Letty, we've no money. It costs to live in New York. You have to pay there even for carrots.'

'I can't bear carrots, horrid nasty things,' she said simply; and 'Can't you work?' she went on defiantly. 'You could be — a janitor.'

'I don't understand steam heat,' he answered, as if that settled the question.

'Can't you learn?' she flung at him bitterly. 'I'd a thousand times rather ask help of Roger than Jaffrey. He loves helping people. He'll get you a job. Don't be *silly*, Stephen. Living here so long, you've just lost your *spunk*.' She spoke emphatically, stressing her words. In a quieter voice she went on: 'It's your chance to begin over. We can't do it here where every one knows us. Every tree in the beech wood reminds us of something we'd better forget,

and I won't have people telling Melisande she's an adopted child!'

'Letty's right,' said Mrs. Boone. 'You write to Roger. Tell him just how the land lays. He and Diana will cook up some scheme.'

It was Uncle Lige who was first to announce a decision to leave Beechwood.

'In his young youth, Jaffrey and I could never see eye to eye,' said the old man. 'I opine that he won't be easier to convert to right ways of thinking now that he's rising fifty. If so be as it were that here I should abide, I feel suspicious the Spaniard lady mightn't want me at her table. It would be a tragic come down for me to be fired at seventy. For that's what would be the upshot since the sinful pride inherent in my old Adam would forbid my taking sustenance in the kitchen. Leastways, of course, unless the whole family joined me in eating there. I'll be settling down with my sister at the county seat, and a beneficent thing 'twill be, for there I'll be nigh unto Primrose Peebles, she that was Primrose Boone, and there I can keep an eye on the young folks and their probable offspring.'

Uncle Lige heaved a great sigh and stretched himself. He looked as though he were summoning all his strength to set out on the twenty-mile walk to the county seat.

'When you get ready to go, Uncle Lige,' said Letty, 'mother and I'll drive you over and see Primrose.

Maybe the old doctor will have some work for you.'

'If it were with hosses, well and good. If so be as it were with automobiles, not so well and less good. An automobile I make no claim to understanding and shall go down to my forefathers under the cold clods of the valley in ignorance of the new-fangled machines. The Good Book tells us, "Man has sought out many inventions." But does it praise said inventions? Nay, not so.'

Roger's letter came promptly. As Stephen opened it, he saw folded within a check for what was, to him, a munificent sum. The letter was like Roger. It was generous, cordial, breathing encouragement. The loan was without interest and came with the affection of a brother and sister. He had already found him work — a part-time position in a library getting books for members and straightening the stack. The pay was not sufficient for his needs, but it would help and he must have time for study. He had been looking out music masters and thought it best to fly high. The most famous in New York was interested. It was almost certain that Stephen would find a church position at once. Diana had found them a flat — but she was writing.

Diana did indeed go into details. The apartment was 'way down in Greenwich Village and could be had very cheaply if Letty would assume certain light duties over the building. Nothing burdensome. Near by was a charming little park where Letty could give

Melisande her airing. It was a private park, but a friend of Roger's had a key and would let her use it. Now, as to mother. Much as she and Roger wanted her with them, if she felt she would be happier with Stephen, she, Diana, must insist on paying her mother's board. That would square things all around and help out Stephen.

Letty eyed the mother wistfully. 'What shall you do?' she asked softly.

'I shan't stay here,' the mother answered slowly. 'So changed this wouldn't be my home. It's not rightly been home since I lost your father. I couldn't rest content in a suite of rooms in a palace. So that's that. Grace wants me and I guess Martin does. But I've always had a great desire for a taste of city life. Grace don't need me and I sort of hanker for New York. As for Diana and Roger, I always believed young married people should be by themselves. Those two are liable to do considerable quarrelling, and it's best they should do it without others mixing and meddling. At my time of life the great thing is to be needed. Letty here's the only one that needs me, and I'll stay with her.'

Letty fluttered to her and gave her cheek the butterfly kiss which was as much of a caress as her shyness permitted.

'I need you, too, mother,' said Stephen, slightly aggrieved.

'Well, no, you don't, Stephen. I don't know as you

need any——' she checked herself. 'Anyhow I'm right glad you think you need me,' she finished with a beaming smile. In a changed voice she said, 'I guess I'll take a stroll through the beech wood.' She passed out through the open door. She went first to look at her rosebush and selected a slip which she would pot that night. She thought regretfully that Jaffrey would probably uproot her treasure. Then she crossed the white road and walked up the rugged path through the heart of the beech wood. That afternoon there was a wind from the northwest and the tall trees bent toward her and whispered to her sorrowfully. They seemed to be telling her of the approaching change which threatened. Many a leafy crown must fall to make way for Jaffrey's stately home. Then the leaves rustling secretly reminded her of what the beech wood had witnessed of her own courtship. Here had been enacted wild and passionate scenes! Here had been romantic longing, love, remorse!

'I never knew her to walk in the beech wood before,' Letty was saying curiously.

'Nor I,' said Stephen, shaking his head. 'She's always been too busy.'

'She knew she had it,' said Letty wisely.

Far beyond their eyes, Margaret Boone was lowering herself carefully to the damp ground by the spring. There she stooped and kissed the black earth where the maidenhair ferns grew thickest.

CHAPTER XXXII

MATERNITY

Little Melisande was restless on the last night under the old rooftree. Letty, afraid she would waken at least one of Jaffrey's five, took her downstairs to the sitting-room and sat there to rock her. The little kerosene lamp was burning on the table near the staircase just as it had done for more than forty years. Everything in the dim room was dear and familiar and she was never to see it any more. She rocked Melisande and crooned her old song, 'A child sleeps under the rosebush fair.' Faithfully she went through every stanza. The stairs creaked. She looked up startled to see Stephen fully dressed.

'Why, Stephen!' she exclaimed mildly, 'I thought you'd gone to sleep hours ago.'

Without answering, he came over to her and looked down at the baby, now fast asleep, a surprisingly chubby fist in her mouth. He gazed at her a long time. When others were about, he had not wanted to pay her any attention, but he knew Letty would not be unsympathetic with his interest.

'She looks like Primrose,' said Letty sweetly. Never before had Letty suggested that Melisande was a Boone.

One of the minor forms of torture from which

Stephen suffered was the uncertainty of how much Letty knew.

'Letty,' he asked humbly, 'did you think the baby ——' he hesitated. No, he couldn't ask.

She was answering his unspoken question. 'It gave me a better right to take her. It seemed as if we were bound to do for her. I'd have loved her anyhow, but I love her all the more for being yours. I knew you'd come to be fond of her.' She looked dreamily down at the sleeping baby. 'I guess Miss Melisande Boone's going to be a real beauty,' she said cheerfully.

'Letty, you're so good — so good.'

She looked up at his voice. Rising, she carried the baby to the couch, laid her down gently and brought up the edges of the Paisley shawl about her. Then she went back to the little rocker and sat down. She held out her arms as a Madonna to a child. He sank to the floor and hid his face in her lap. She smoothed his curls, she leaned over and kissed him. He caught her hand and put it to his lips. He sank lower and kissed her feet. He was saying something, but his utterance was too choked for her to understand. She bent her head to listen.

'I'll never hurt you again, Letty, God help me.'

'I know, dear,' she answered.

'You'll never believe me if I say I love you,' he whispered humbly.

'I know, dear,' she said again.